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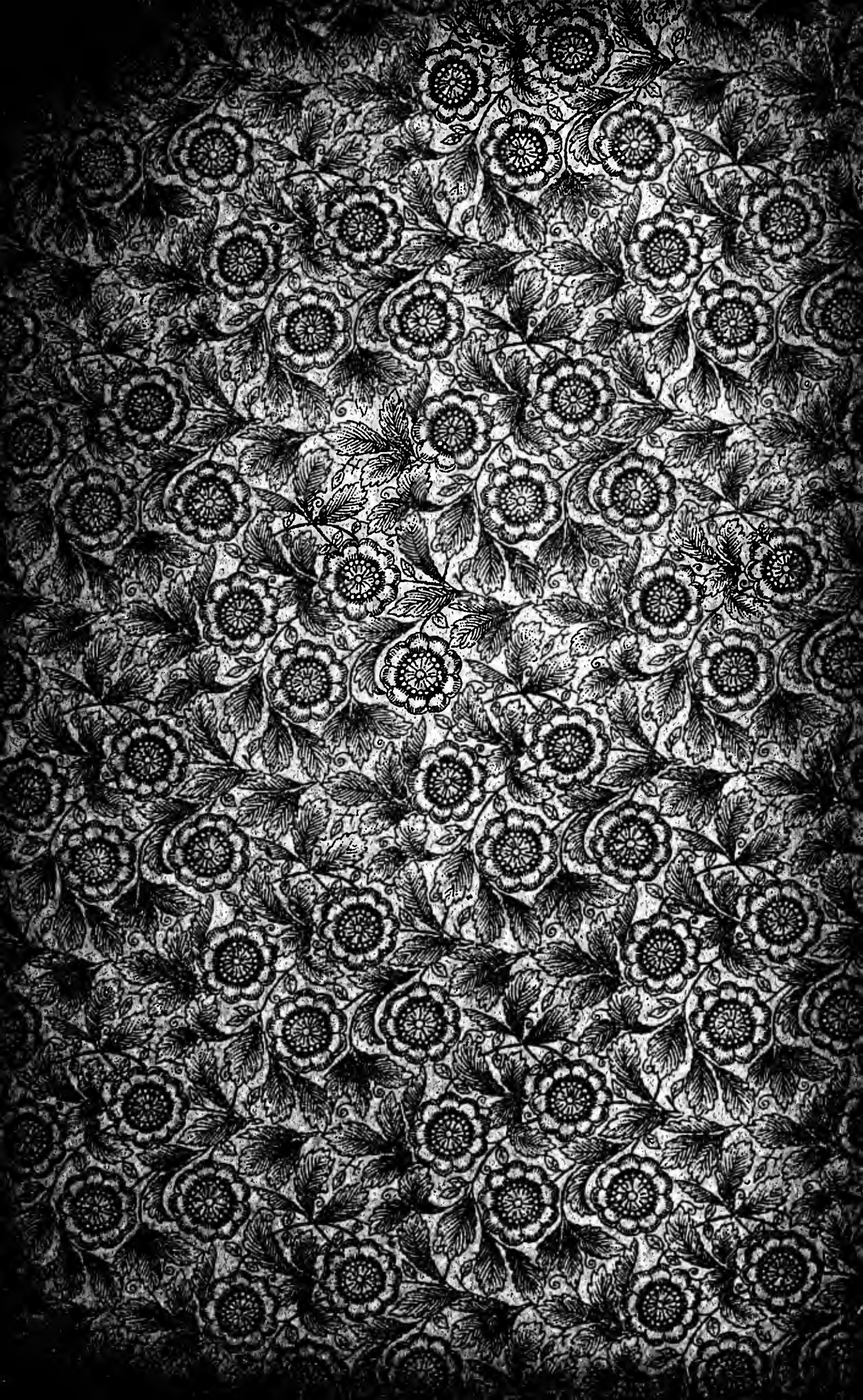
FLORENCE·MARRYAT.





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ON CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.



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BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

AUTHOR OF

“LOVE’S CONFLICT,” “MY SISTER THE ACTRESS,” “GENTLEMAN AND
COURTIER,” “A CROWN OF SHAME,” ETC., ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST TRAIN.

As soon as Colonel de Crespigny found himself fairly on the road home, with his wife, he recovered his usual exuberant spirits, and behaved as if no cause of annoyance had ever risen between them. With his small bump of morality, and very large bump of self-esteem, it was difficult to persuade him that any woman could be really offended with him for such a ridiculous trifle as a lapse from virtue. He laughed, and talked, and rallied the two girls sitting opposite to him upon every possible subject, until Cecil Seton (who was always nervous in his presence) shrank into her corner of the carriage, and

Lady Muriel (who had preserved silence ever since she started from Oakley Court) closed her eyes and pretended to go to sleep. But sleep was the last thing likely to visit her perplexed and agitated brain. She had given in—as many wives have done before, and since—because she dreaded the scandal of an open rupture, and the breaking up of her newly-acquired home, but her heart had not, and never would, forgive the insult which had been offered to her. When, at last, the carriage drew up before the stately portals of the mansion in Queen's Gate, she entered the house, a different woman from what she had been when she passed out of it, twelve hours before. She knew now what she had to expect from her husband, that he did not believe in love, or virtue, or honour, as *she* understood the words, and that deceit was the chief stock-in-trade with which he carried on his dealings with the other sex. He had called her his “darling,” and his

“dearest,” and “the only woman he had ever loved,” several times since their apparent reconciliation, but the words had lost all meaning for her, and she wished he would drop them altogether. In fact, his conduct had revolted her. She had never cared for him, as she should have done for her husband. She had been persuaded to marry him from the dread of poverty, and the unpleasant position in which she found herself at Oakley Court, and somewhat also, from the force of his own passionate pleading, and evident admiration of her beauty. But she had never esteemed him from the first day of their marriage, and now she *utterly despised* him. She walked straight through the hall into the dining-room and stood there before the fire, with her proud young head erect, and her furs drawn tightly around her, as though she were in a strange place, and not her own home. The colonel tried to disengage her wrappings, but she only drew them closer.

“You will take off that mantle, my darling. It will feel too warm in this room,” he argued.

“No! thank you. I am going straight to my own. James, send Rosette to me.”

“But you will take a little refreshment before you retire, Muriel, if it is only a glass of wine, after your long drive. *Do*, my dearest.”

“I am not in want of it, and it is easily sent for, if required. Come, Cissy dear, I am sure you are tired and in need of rest. We will go and have a long sleep together. Good-night, Arthur.”

And accompanied by her maid and her step-sister, Lady Muriel de Crespigny swept out of the room, leaving the colonel in a very crestfallen and bewildered condition. He had had his *cong  * given him in the politest manner possible, but he didn't understand it. It was incredible to him, that any woman could hold out against his kisses and promises

of amendment. It was absurd, ridiculous, to make such a mountain out of a molehill, such a fuss over an unavoidable *désagrément* that might have happened to any one. But after cursing Caroline Lorrimer for having brought about such an unpleasant state of affairs, and his own ill-luck for being found out, the colonel retired to his apartment, perfectly convinced that a night's reflection was all that was required to bring his young wife to her senses, and make her see the folly of going against her own interests. But, strange to say, solitude and separation seemed to have quite a contrary effect upon Lady Muriel de Crespigny, and as soon as she was beyond the influence of her husband's animal magnetism, his conduct assumed its proper proportions in her eyes, and she saw what a wreck she had made of her life almost before it had begun. Cecil Seton was hardly a fit *confidante* for the troubles of a married woman, but she was several years older than her step-sister, and

ardently attached to her, and Muriel found it an infinite relief to tell her the whole story, and sob out her indignation and her misery in her arms. “And it was for *this*,” she concluded, “that I gave up my poor Athol, who was all truth and goodness, and would have died rather than deceive me. I can remember how particular he was to speak the truth exactly as it occurred, in all things, and how often he reproved me for exaggeration, or for telling a fib. Oh, Cissy, I feel this is a judgment on me. I should never have broken off my engagement with Athol Fergusson because he is the only man I have ever loved. I was a poor, pitiful coward to let papa persuade me to give him up, just because he was poor, and to send him back the ring, which I had promised again, and again, to wear to my life’s end. And now—*he* thinks I am a bad, faithless girl, and all I have got in exchange for him, is *this*. Oh, Cissy! my heart will break.”

Cecil Seton, who was much more practical than her sister, saw at once, that indulging in such dangerous reminiscences, could only do Lady Muriel harm.

“Hush! dear,” she said. “Don’t talk of that now, and try not to think of it. It is of no use, Muriel. Colonel de Crespigny is your husband, and the other one can never be, and so it is wicked to cry about him.”

“But, I can’t help it—I can’t help it. This horrid business seems to have brought it all back again. Oh! my poor, poor Athol!” But at this juncture, Cecil put her hand quickly over her sister’s mouth. Agnes Prudhomme had appeared at the dressing-room door, to ask if her mistress required anything further from her that night.

“What is it?” cried Muriel, as soon as she could free herself.

“It is Agnes, dear,” replied Miss Seton, cautiously; “shall I dismiss her?”

“No! No! I don’t mind Agnes,” said

Muriel, imprudently. "She knows all about Athol and me. She took him my last farewells when I left Revranches, didn't you, Agnes?"

"I did, *miladi*, and I thought it would have broken his heart to hear that you were gone."

"Ah! come here, Agnes," exclaimed her mistress, holding out her arms. "Come close to me. It will do me good to feel you here, for you loved him almost as much as I did."

"Oh, Muriel! be cautious," cried Cecil Seton, but the Belgian girl had already sunk on her knees by the *fauteuil* and wound her arms about Muriel's form.

"*Mademoiselle* need have no fear," she said, looking up at Miss Seton with her dark eyes. "*Miladi* and I have known each other from little children, and whatever *miladi* may say will be sacred to me."

"And Agnes knows all about this horrid woman Mrs. Lorrimer, too," interposed Muriel;

“she lived with her before she came here, and found out the whole truth. The colonel put her in the situation, and it was almost as great an insult to her as he has given to me.”

“Ah! *mon Dieu*,” exclaimed Agnes, shrugging her shoulders, “but it *was* a situation. Who could have helped finding out all about *cette femme infame*, when *monsieur le colonel* was there almost every day. But when I felt sure of the truth I said, ‘Let me go. Take me out of this house which it is a wickedness to live in, and let me serve *Mademoiselle* Muriel, who is good and pure as a little child.’ But I never thought that Madame Lorrimer would have the effrontery to follow us here. Oh! the shame and disgrace of it. I was dying to tell *miladi* all from the first day of her visit.”

“Never mind, Agnes. She will never trouble either of us again. That is quite certain. But it is a sorry discovery to make

when one has been but six months married. I don't think my poor Athol would have treated me so. Do you, Agnes?"

Agnes lifted her hands and eyes in deprecation of such an idea.

"*Monsieur* Fergusson do such a thing. Ah! *miladi*, you know him too well for that. He was the very soul of honour, and virtue, and all that is best. *Monsieur* Fergusson was an angel. How often used Joseph to tell me of his goodness and his benevolence. All the world loved him. Ah! *pauvre monsieur*, his heart would be sad to see *miladi* weep like this."

"I am weeping for him, Agnes, and for my own folly in giving him up. How I wish I was back at Revranches, and had never come to England at all. It was a stupid old place, but we were very happy there, and peaceful, and no one had the power to insult us."

"Ah! it was a *heavenly* place," cried

Agnes, “and I often think of it with regret. But cheer up, *miladi*. There are happier days in store for you. Marriage does not make our lives, remember, and with *miladi*’s wealth and opportunities, she can have a thousand distractions to help her shake off these little annoyances.”

“Yes, you may be right, Agnes ; but at present I can only think how mad I was, to throw away the happiness that was within my reach in exchange for a life like this—and all for the sake of a little money. But it is no use grieving. Go to bed now. You must be tired, and I want nothing more.”

“Ah ! if I could but console *miladi*.”

“You cannot. No one can console me, but I know you wish me well, and I am grateful for your kindness. Good-night, Agnes. I shall never lose my interest in you. You are the one link left with my dear old life at Revranches.”

The girl rose from her knees, and kissing

her mistress's hand (apparently with the utmost respect) quitted the apartment. But as soon as she was gone, Cecil Seton exclaimed in tones that were unusually excited for her quiet disposition :

“ Oh, Muriel ! *Why* do you speak so openly to that girl ? Are you *sure* she is trustworthy. I don't like that cunning look in her eyes, nor the extreme familiarity in her manner when she addresses you.”

“ That is nothing. She is naturally of an excitable disposition. I don't think there is any harm in Agnes. I used not to like her very much at Revranches, because her temper was so hasty, but I daresay she had a great deal to try her, and I have never seen anything of it since she came here.”

“ But you talked to her of that gentleman, Mr. Fergusson, just as you did to me. Are you sure she won't go and repeat it ? ”

“ I didn't say anything but what she has heard already,” replied Muriel languidly ;

“she has known Athol as long as I have, and I used to tell her all about our engagement. Poor darling! *he* never liked her much, I remember ; but then I fancy she had a *penchant* for him herself, and that made him a little shy of her.”

“And might make her a little malicious. Don’t forget *that*, Muriel.”

“I think you are very hard on her,” replied her step-sister fretfully. “Is no one to be allowed to pity me for falling into this terrible plight?”

“Oh! Muriel, darling,” cried Cecil, kissing her fondly, “*I* pity you, and love you before all the world. But don’t you see, dear, that Colonel de Crespigny is likely (should any of your regrets for Mr. Fergusson reach his ears) to add jealousy to his other virtues, and that would not increase the comfort of your home.”

“But I told him about Athol before we were married, Cecil.”

“Then he is all the more likely to be on the *qui vive* to find out something against you, should the subject be revived in his hearing. He would be charmed (in all probability) to find a stone to throw at you, in return for your resentment against him. You made it public, you see, Muriel, and that is an error which men seldom forgive. And if I mistake not, Colonel de Crespigny harbours a very revengeful disposition. Be careful, darling, and don’t trust your secrets to Agnes Prudhomme. You may call me hard, but I don’t think she looks like an honest and truthful girl.”

Lady Muriel sighed and answered nothing, but it seemed sad to her, to be warned against the only creature, to whom she could talk with any comfort of her lost lover.

Agnes Prudhomme meanwhile, creeping along the carpeted corridor on her way to bed, caught sight of the colonel, standing at his dressing-room door, which was slightly

ajar. He had fancied her light footfall to be that of his wife, and had opened his door in anticipation of her paying him a visit. When his eye fell on Agnes, he looked disappointed, but said pleasantly all the same :

“So it is you, little one. Good-night.”

The girl did not answer his salutation with a courtesy and pass on as might have been expected, but stopping short by his side, turned her handsome bold face up to his own.

“Well, *mon cher*,” she replied coolly, “and who did you think it was? *Miladi* Muriel come to ask your forgiveness? She is not in the humour for that, *I* can tell you. She is too busy abusing you at this moment by her dressing-room fire.”

“How do you know that, Agnes?”

“Because I have just left her and Miss Seton, and heard all they said.”

“Come in here for a moment and let me have the benefit of your experience,” said de

Crespigny holding the door open. Agnes passed through without hesitation, and seated herself on a chair. "And now," continued the colonel, "what does my lady wife say of me?"

"*Mon Dieu.* It would take from now till to-morrow morning to tell you that. She has so much to say. Of course, it is all about this Lorrimer affair. Bah! but she is foolish to concern herself about an old pig like that—a woman of the past century. One might as well become jealous of one's grandmother."

"And aren't *you* jealous of her?" said de Crespigny, amused at the girl's impertinence.

Agnes's dark eyes opened to their widest extent.

"I? *Monsieur me moque.* I am not jealous even of *miladi* herself. She is handsome. Yes, but all men do not care for fair women; and I know that I, myself, have twice her *chic.*"

“You are right there, Agnes,” exclaimed the colonel, laughing at her audacity. “You are a deuced pretty little girl, and you have more *chic* than all the rest put together. But am I never to be forgiven for having introduced poor Mrs. Lorrimer to Lady Muriel de Crespigny?”

“I think it will be some time first,” replied Agnes, nodding her head oracularly. “You see it has, unfortunately, revived an old memory in *miladi*’s breast, and she can do nothing now but sit and cry for *Monsieur* Fergusson.”

An oath escaped from between de Crespigny’s clenched teeth; but he professed ignorance on the subject.

“And who is *Monsieur* Fergusson, pray?”

“Ah! don’t make pretence to me. I have spoken of him to you before. The young man at Revranches, of whom *Mademoiselle* Muriel was so fond. Every night — every night, without fail, she would go out to meet him

on the Ramparts, and they would kiss and make love, and talk of the time when they should be married; and, *parbleu! mon cher*, in my opinion, they *ought* to have been married. What is the good of a woman when all her heart is gone out like that, to another man?"

Colonel de Crespigny ground his teeth together as he listened to these words. He had heard of the Revranches lover from Miss Rutherford at the commencement of his intimacy with Lady Muriel, but had thought nothing of it then. A boy and girl love affair. What man or woman had not had a dozen such before settling down to life? Even when Muriel had spoken to him timidly, before their marriage, of her first engagement he had not stopped to consider if it would have any effect upon their future happiness. In his arrogant self-conceit he regarded all younger men as not worthy of comparison with himself, and would have

spurned the idea of any rivalry between them. But that was before he had married Lady Muriel, and when his passion for her was so strong that he would have wrested her from the arms of a dozen men, if need be, in order to make her his own. But a man thinks very differently six months after marriage from what he does before. Then the love mist has cleared away from before his eyes, and he can see things as they really are; and the cropping up of the subject of the Revranches lover was sufficient to disturb the colonel's peace of mind and make him angry. What relationship did this past story bear to the episode of Caroline Lorrimer? and why should Lady Muriel commence to weep for Athol Fergusson directly she found out she had been deceived by himself? His conscience answered the question plainly enough, but he refused to believe it without further evidence.

“Agnes,” he exclaimed, seizing her by

the wrist, "you must tell me everything you know concerning Lady Muriel and this fellow at Revranches. Who was he? Where is he now? and how long did they know each other? I insist upon hearing it."

"*Ma foi, monsieur,*" replied the girl, disengaging herself and rubbing her arm, "you need not pinch so hard if you *are* anxious. And what can I say more than you know already? His name is Athol Fergusson, and he is now away, *miladi* says, in India; and they were engaged for a whole year before you fetched her over to England."

"And—and—were they *very* much attached to each other, Agnes?" he demanded presently.

"*Attached!* Ah, *monsieur*, they lived only for each other," cried Agnes, turning up her eyes. "They were inseparable. And I thought *Monsieur* Fergusson would have killed himself when he lost *Mademoiselle* Muriel. But what would you have? Where there

is no money one cannot afford to love. *Miladi* has done the wise thing to marry well. But for love—bah. *I* love *monsieur*, twice as well as *miladi* does.”

“But she shall keep faithful to me, whether she loves me or not, or I will *kill her*,” exclaimed the colonel fiercely.

Agnes Prudhomme recognized the motive that prompted the words, and smiled inwardly to recognize the weapon by which she might turn him at her will. Colonel de Crespigny was, as Cecil Seton had suggested, of a most jealous and revengeful disposition, and always ready to credit other people with the vices he was conscious of possessing himself. He was faithless and deceitful, a man of lax principles and looser practice, and therefore he believed everybody must be the same. Especially did he credit women with the smallest possible amount of virtue. He spoke of them to his own sex in the most brutal and lowering

terms, and was ready at any time to cast a slur upon their character. His was a disposition therefore inclined to suspect the worst, and be intensely jealous at the merest trifle. Agnes perceived her advantage, and continued to pour oil upon the flame.

“Ah, *monsieur* must not talk in that dreadful strain. The poor young man is in India. Bah! how could *miladi* be otherwise than faithful? 'Tis a pity though that she cannot dismiss him altogether from her mind; for, after all, I suppose people *do* sometimes return, even from India.”

“He had better not come within the reach of my fist when he does,” cried de Crespigny, “or I'll teach him to come after my wife. And *she* had best be careful, too. *I* know what women are; the whole lot of them not to be trusted farther than they can be seen. But, by Jove! the woman who tries to deceive me will suffer for it, if I take her life and my own too.”

Agnes burst out laughing.

“*Ciel*, what a storm. One would think I had come to tell you I had left poor *Monsieur* Fergusson in *miladi*’s dressing-room. But I am afraid you have been deceiving *me, mon cher*, and that you have really a greater interest in *miladi* than you pretend.”

“No, no, Agnes; I assure you I have not. I can see that she is handsome and *spirituelle*; but she is so cold and unloving that I really don’t care about her a bit. Only one must keep up appearances, you know, and since she is my wife, I shall look after her.”

“You are right there,” replied Agnes, rising, “and if I mistake not, you will find your work cut out for you. *Bon soir, monsieur.*”

He kissed her as she approached him, and she accepted the salute as a matter of course. It was evidently not the first that had passed between them.

“I shall expect you to help me, Agnes, as much as lies in your power, and let me know everything you may see or hear. *Miladi* will find that (whoever she may weep for) I know how to take care of my own.”

He closed the door softly as he spoke, and Agnes Prudhomme went to her room, well satisfied to have laid the first train of gunpowder that might hereafter rase the house to its foundations.



CHAPTER II.

“PRESTO ! CHANGE !”

BOBBY HOLMES (one of the numerous arrows in the quiver of the Protestant clergyman at Revranches, who had been shot from Belgium into a London bank to look after himself as early as it was possible) was walking down Regent Street one day at the close of the London season, admiring the fashionable crowd around him, the beautiful thoroughbred women lounging in their luxurious carriages, drawn by still more beautiful and thoroughbred horses, when his attention was attracted towards two ladies who were gazing into a shop window a few paces in advance of him.

“It *is*,” thought Bobby to himself, “and yet it *can’t* be. It’s *impossible*.”

But his curiosity was so excited, he determined to gratify it, and so he halted before another shop window, from which he directed sidelong glances at the objects of his interest. There was nothing remarkable about either of them to strike the ordinary spectator. They were apparently a mother and daughter, sauntering leisurely down the street (as ladies love to do) and commenting on all the novelties exposed for sale. They were both dressed in slight mourning, the elder of the two in a rich black costume profusely trimmed with black lace and glittering all over with beads, and the younger in a combination of soft grey and white, with feathers of the same tint in the hat that shaded her brow. Bobby could not catch a good view of their faces, but something in their manner and general appearance riveted him to the spot, until the elder lady turned round and convinced him that he had not been mistaken. It was Mrs. Fergusson and her

daughter Helen he had been looking at, but how on earth they came to be in London, and attired like women of fashion and means, made his head dizzy to think of.

“Mrs. Fergusson!” he exclaimed, advancing upon her with an outstretched hand and smile of welcome. “Do my eyes really not deceive me? I have been watching you and Helen for the last minute, for I thought it was *impossible* it could be yourselves. How long have you been in England?”

But Mrs. Fergusson did not appear to have any sympathy with his surprise. She drew her tall and rather angular figure up to its full height as she put her gloved hand in his and answered in a simpering tone, “Really, Mr. Holmes, I do not see the impossibility. Why should we shut ourselves up in Revranches all our lives, any more than yourself? Helen, my dear, this is Mr. Robert Holmes! You must remember him in Revranches.”

Bobby's face fell. He had always been "Bobby" with the Fergussons, as with everybody else in the old Belgian town, and the title of "Mr. Holmes" placed a gulf between them which he was too much of a gentleman not to recognize.

"I trust you have not quite forgotten me," he said, shaking hands with Helen, "but when I come to think of it, it must be more than a year since we met. But to meet you *here*, quite took my breath away. My father has never mentioned your removal to me. Do you stay in England long? And dear old Athol! How is he getting on in Malta? He promised to write to me, but he has never done so. Lazy fellow!"

"It is indeed evident, Mr. Holmes, that you have heard nothing about us," replied Mrs. Fergusson with a self-satisfied air, as they recommenced their stroll together, "or of the change in my dear son's circumstances. He is not in Malta. He returned

home a month ago. His uncle, Sir Robert, is dead, and Athol naturally came into the baronetcy.”

“And he is *Sir* Athol Fergusson!” cried Bobby, with his mouth open.

“He is *Sir* Athol,” repeated the lady suavely, “and the circumstance obliged us to return to England. Not that it was absolutely necessary for my son to leave the army, but his first thought has ever been for his mother and sisters, and he was most anxious to see us settled in our proper position at Bromieshall.”

“Where is that?” asked ignorant Bobby.

“It is the name of my son’s estate, near Richmond in Surrey; but of course *we* shall reside in it as long as he remains unmarried.”

“Ah! I expect *that* will soon come to pass now,” exclaimed Bobby.

His remark did not seem to please his companion, who replied frigidly:

“I beg to differ from you, Mr. Holmes. Sir Athol is not at all likely to make any mistake of that sort. He has too deep a sense of what he owes to *us*, to put us to any inconvenience in order to gratify a passing fancy. I should hope he would not *dream* of marrying for many years to come.”

“And what is his address, Mrs. Fergusson? I should dearly like to see him again. Does he live at Bromieshall with you?”

“Not entirely, though we see him very often. He has his own rooms in town. Helen, my dear, have you one of your brother’s cards? You might give it to Mr. Holmes.”

“And may I ask after my old friend Alice, Mrs. Fergusson? She was always so jolly and good to me.”

“Alice is now *Madame la Baronne D’Aragon*,” was the measured reply. “She was married last Christmas and is living in Brussels, where her husband has a splendid

house in the *Quartier Louise*. We will tell her of your kind remembrances when next we write.”

Poor Bobby felt quite crestfallen. Every body he asked after seemed to have suddenly risen to a height quite above his head, where it was presumption in him even to think of them. His thoughts flew back to the old times in Revranches, when he had helped Helen to clean her paint brushes and Alice to patch up her music, and the two girls had fagged all day, giving music and drawing lessons, whilst their half-fed mother remained at home darning their stockings and repairing their linen by the meagre light of a *pétrole* lamp. Yes! times were altered with them—there was no doubt of that—but the intelligence had come so suddenly upon him, he could hardly realize it. And as he pondered, another thought rose in his mind of some one who had been much associated with the Fergusson family in those days.

“Do you know,” he said suddenly, “it *does* seem so strange when I think of it, but last night I met *another* of my old Revranches friends—quite by accident, and for the first time, too—and it surprised me almost as much as our meeting has done to-day.”

“And who was that?” inquired Mrs. Fergusson pleasantly.

“Lady Muriel de Crespigny! You remember little Muriel Damer, that old Athol used to be so fond of, don’t you? My faith! how he used to rave about that girl when we were alone together! I didn’t know anything about love in those days, and thought him a regular lunatic, but he *was* gone on her! There’s no doubt of that. I wonder if he has forgotten her yet.”

“Mr. Holmes! What *are* you speaking of?” interposed his listener hurriedly. “Surely you forget that Lady Muriel is a married woman.”

“Oh, no, I don’t, Mrs. Fergusson, and I

don't think her husband would let any man forget it either. They say he's as jealous of her as a Turk. But, oh, she *is* lovely ! You can have no idea what a beautiful woman she has developed into. There was a crowd round her all the evening. She recognized me at once, though, and welcomed me with her old sweet smile, but I fancied, somehow, that I reminded her too painfully of poor old Athol (her eyes looked so distressed when she glanced at me), and so I cut the interview shorter than I should otherwise have done. But, by George ! she is a beauty, and no mistake ; and they say her husband, Colonel de Crespigny, is as rich as Cræsus. Wish I had his luck !”

“Mr. Holmes,” interposed Mrs. Fergusson anxiously, “*promise me* you won't say anything of this to Sir Athol. Don't mention Lady Muriel's name before him, please. We have dropped the subject by mutual consent, and it is better not alluded to.”

“Oh! certainly, if it is your wish,” replied Bobby, “but if Sir Athol goes into society he is bound to meet her. She is to be seen everywhere. What is your reason? Does he still fret after her?”

“Most decidedly *not*,” said Mrs. Fergusson with asperity; “I should hope he has more sense than to regret the loss of an empty-headed frivolous girl like that. Besides, there never *was* anything serious between them, and Sir Athol has assured me (since his return home) that he has no regrets whatever on the subject. And therefore I beg—I especially *beg* of you, Mr. Holmes, not to be the means of reviving it.”

“But if Athol has ceased to care for her why should you mind his speaking of her?” demanded the pertinacious Bobby.

“Because I believe her to have been a *bad* girl,” replied his hearer vehemently, “and she has probably developed into a bad wife. London society is at a very low

ebb at present, Mr. Holmes, and the less young men enter it the better. Muriel Damer was a bold and artful girl. She tried to inveigle my poor Athol into an engagement against the wishes of his friends, and had it not been for the interposition of Providence, which separated them, there is no knowing how it would have ended. And I should be very sorry to have to answer for the reputation of Lady Muriel de Crespigny now, or to see Sir Athol brought within the circle of her influence.”

But Bobby Holmes (although very modest and unassuming) was too much of a man to hear a woman needlessly abused without sticking up for her. He felt and looked quite fierce as he replied:

“Come, come, Mrs. Fergusson! you are going too far. You have no right to speak of Lady Muriel de Crespigny in such terms. Why, it’s slander. I know several of her acquaintances, and I have never heard any-

thing but good of her, so it would be more generous (in my opinion) to hope that if the girl *had* the faults which you describe, the woman may have amended them."

To this appeal Mrs. Fergusson vouchsafed no direct reply.

"I beg your pardon," she said haughtily, "but our carriage is waiting for us at this corner. Helen, my dear, I shall not walk any further now. We will drive back to Peter Robinson's. Good morning, Mr. Holmes," and with almost imperceptible bows the two ladies got into their carriage and drove away.

"A most impertinent young man," exclaimed Mrs. Fergusson indignantly, as soon as she was out of hearing; "fancy his having the assurance to tell me what I said was 'slander.' But those Holmes were all ill-bred. Mind, Helen, I won't have him invited down to Bromieshall. He doesn't enter my house."

“What are we to do if Athol brings him down? He was always very partial to the Holmes’ boys,” said Helen.

“We must invent an excuse for not receiving him,” returned her mother, “for I will not submit to be talked to in that way. And his knowing that horrid Lady Muriel makes him doubly objectionable. We shall have *her* at Bromieshall next. It is not to be endured.”

Meanwhile Bobby stood on the pavement staring after the neatly-appointed carriage which had whisked his old friends out of sight. The *rencontre* was like a fairy dream to him. Was it really true that he had been talking to Helen and Mrs. Fergusson, clad in silks and satins, and holding their heads as high as if they had never known such a place as Revranches, with all the *désagréments* of poverty? As he mused over the past interview his hand roved to his waistcoat pocket, and lighted on

Athol's card. He took it out and read the inscription :

“ *Sir Athol Fergusson.*

“ 313, *Piccadilly, W.*

“ *Bromieshall.*”

“Dear old Athol!” he thought, “I wonder if good fortune has changed his heart, as it has theirs. No, it is impossible. He was too noble and genuine for that. These women never *had* hearts. I can remember Mrs. Fergusson's peevishness and Helen's tart remarks, even in Revranches. Alice was the only one of the home lot that was worth anything, and I was awfully spooney on Alice. Bless her smiling face! But I will go and see old Ath at once. If he is the same good fellow I have always believed him to be he will know how to welcome a true friend. Let me see, 313, Piccadilly. Why, it is not a stone's throw away. I shall be there in five minutes.”

And in effect, five minutes after, Bobby Holmes had drawn up before the chambers in Piccadilly. He was just about to ring the bell, when the door opened and a gentleman came out. It was Sir Athol Fergusson himself. Bobby knew him in a moment. His year's absence in Malta had but slightly browned his naturally fair complexion, and the serious dark blue eyes were still looking forth upon the world, from beneath the shelter of their long black lashes, with a solemn searching gaze, as if they were looking for something which they had never found. The sensitive mouth, with its clean-cut lips, was shaded now but not hidden by a small moustache, and the youthful figure was attired in the height of the fashion, as became such a wealthy young man. And yet about everything that surrounded Athol Fergusson—from the expression of his features to the quiet style of his clothing—there hung an indescribable *something*, a kind

of premature sobriety, that showed that suffering had moulded the man before his time. But as his eyes lit upon Bobby Holmes' round face and sandy whiskers, their expression changed, and a soft genial light came into them, like the moon passing from behind a summer cloud.

"My *dear* Bobby," he exclaimed in his quiet genial voice, "were you coming to see *me*? How glad I am to meet you again. How did you find me out?"

He had closed the door behind him, but he turned again now, and fixed his latch-key in the lock.

"I met Mrs. and Miss Fergusson in Regent Street just now, and they gave me your address," said Bobby. "But, Athol, you were going out. Don't let me interfere with your plans. Another day will do just as well for me."

"But it won't do as well for *me*, Bobby," returned Athol, with his sweet smile. "I

was only going out for want of something better to do, and I would greatly prefer talking to you at home. Come in and see my den, and we will have a cigar together.”

He threw the door open as he spoke, and they passed into the hall, which led to his chambers. A front room with an inlaid oak flooring, strewn with Persian rugs, seemed to be fitted as an ante-chamber to the rest of the suite. A luxurious divan occupied one side of the apartment, and a cottage piano stood across the wall at the other, whilst behind it, to fill up the recess, a large palm-tree fern reared its glossy branches. The windows that looked upon the street were of stained glass, and heavy velvet curtains separated it from the next chamber. But beyond a couple of small tables and a lounging-chair, there was no other furniture in the room. Bobby appeared to regard its arrangement with surprise.

“I call this my smoking-room,” said Athol,

“but it is a useful place to put visitors whom I am not prepared to receive. You see that I have my piano here. It sounds so much better in an empty room. I still retain that horrible habit of humming and strumming to myself, but fortunately”—with a sigh—“there is no one here to be worried by it, except my valet, and he’s paid to be worried. I banished my clock here too,” he continued, pointing to a magnificent Louis XIII. set of clock and candelabra that ornamented the black marble mantelshelf. “A clock ticking in my private room is a nuisance I cannot endure. Sometimes I have thought it would drive me *mad*.”

He paused for a moment as if some sad recollection had come over him, but shook it off with an effort.

“Come along, Bobby!” he exclaimed cheerfully, as he pushed aside the heavy *portière*, “this is my sanctum, where I spend my mornings over the papers and the coffee-

pot, and if ever you feel inclined to look in upon me, old fellow, you may be sure of a hearty welcome.”

He turned and grasped his friend's hand as he spoke, and a mist—that could scarcely be called moisture—rose to his blue eyes with the warmth of his greeting.

“Oh, Athol,” replied Bobby, “or *Sir* Athol, as I suppose I should say——”

“No such thing, Bobby. I'll knock you down if you ever attempt to call me by anything but the old name. Why, I wonder how many games of football and cricket you and I have had together in the olden days—those dear old days, Bobby, at Revranches?”

“Yes, we had a high time of it on occasions there, but I'm sure *you've* no need to regret it, Athol. *I* have exchanged my school-life for a worse drudgery, but *you* were born with a silver spoon in your mouth, and no mistake—a good big spoon too.”

“I suppose most people would say the

same," said Athol, "but money has no power to buy happiness, Bobby. However, don't think me ungrateful. Since my poor uncle was destined to go, I am very thankful I was his heir, for my mother's and sister's sake, but it was almost as great a surprise to me as to you. I knew, of course, after my little cousin died that I had a chance of coming into the title, but I looked upon it as a very uncertain and remote one; and to tell you the truth, I didn't seem to care a straw about it. When the news *did* come, it was very sudden, and I was not half so elated as I thought I should be. However, my dear mother and sister are provided for, and that is all I care about. I think they are just as happy as they can be, down at Bromieshall, which will always be their home."

"Until you marry, Mrs. Fergusson told me," said Bobby slily.

"I shall *never* marry," replied Athol quietly. "And now, Bobby, what will you

take—coffee and curaçoa, or brandy and soda? We'll arrange these little matters first, and then settle down for a good long talk.”

“Well, Athol, brandies and sodas being rather familiar drinks to me, and coffee and curaçoa being luxuries, I think I'll choose the latter,” said Bobby.

“All right, old man; please yourself and you'll please me,” replied Athol, as he rang the bell and ordered their wants to be attended to.

“My bedroom leads out of this room,” continued Athol. “Come and see how convenient it is, with my bath room and dressing-room adjoining. I jumped into these chambers on the death of Lord Murray Saville, and thought myself uncommonly lucky to secure them. They were decorated and fitted up expressly for him, and I bought most of the furniture from his executors. It saved me the trouble of choosing for myself, you see.”

Bobby glanced from the silver and glass and ivory that decorated the toilet-table to the luxurious appointments of the bed and bath room, and sighed a genuine sigh of envious admiration.

“Well, Athol, old fellow, if you’re not contented and happy with all this, why you never *will* be—that’s all I can say. Why, man alive, I don’t wonder at your saying you’ll never marry. I should just think myself in Paradise in such a nest.”

“And yet Adam could not be contented without an Eve! Short-sighted fool,” said Athol, with the nearest approach to sarcasm his voice could manage.

“I agree with you,” replied Bobby, “for women are awful nuisances when all’s said and done, and I bet there are not many married men who don’t wish themselves unmarried again. If your wife’s ugly and stupid, you’re ashamed of her, and if she’s beautiful and witty, you’re bound to be

jealous of her. There's Colonel de Crespigny, for example——”

Sir Athol flushed darkly red.

“*Whom* did you say?” he asked quickly.

Bobby bit his lip. He had let the cat out of the bag; but he couldn't help it, so he went boldly on.

“Colonel de Crespigny; only a man I know who is awfully jealous of his wife.”

“Of Lady Muriel—Muriel Damer as she used to be at Revranches,” replied Athol between his teeth. “Well, what of it? Has he any cause?”

He spoke so quietly that his friend was deceived; but had he studied his face, he could not have failed to recognize the struggle he was passing through. “Hang it all,” thought Bobby, “Mrs. Fergusson must be mistaken. He has forgotten all about her.”

“So you know that Lady Muriel married de Crespigny?” he continued. “And here

have I been avoiding her name, for fear of reviving unpleasant recollections in you."

"You need have no fear of that, Bobby. Everything between Lady Muriel and myself was over a long time ago."

"I thought as much, only your mother made such a point of my promising not to mention the subject before you. But as it's all right, I'll tell you what I know. You asked if Colonel de Crespigny had any cause for jealousy? None, I believe, except his wife's beauty, and she has turned out a Venus, and no mistake."

"You know her then, Bobby?"

"I met her yesterday at a party at the Cranstons', and she was awfully nice and jolly, and asked me to go and see her in Queen's Gate. Will you go with me, Athol? and then you will see for yourself what a beauty she has grown. She was always a pretty little thing at Revranches, but too skinny for my taste, but she has developed

wonderfully. All the fellows were talking about her. Will you come?”

“No, thank you.”

“Why not? I hear they have a magnificent mansion in Queen’s Gate, and give large parties.”

“I don’t care for visiting.”

“You are not a misanthrope, are you, Athol?”

“Not exactly; but I never cared for what is termed ‘society,’ and I never shall. It seems a great waste of time to me. You stand about the whole evening among a crowd of strangers, and when you return home you do not carry away a single word with you that is worth remembering.”

“But you get some very sweet smiles sometimes.”

“I don’t care for such smiles, and I don’t believe in them. They are too liberally distributed, as a rule, for me. I am much happier at home with my pipe and a book.”

“You used not to smoke in Revranches.”

“No, and never thought I should. I had no troubles to blow away then. But I have found smoking a great comfort since. It is a sort of mild intoxicant that lulls one’s senses into temporary forgetfulness or resignation.”

“My dear old man, you talk as if you had had a lot of bother. Let me see, Athol. How old are you? Not four-and-twenty yet.”

“Old enough to be sick of the world, my dear boy. But let us talk a little of yourself now. How is your dear old father? How good he used to be to me in the vacations. And your brothers—Denis and Alfred and Tom—are they in London too? And your sisters? Tell me everything about your old home.”

“Well, Athol, you know our name is Legion, and if I begin to divulge the family history I don’t know when I shall come to a full stop. To begin with the ladies, my dear old mother is well and hearty, thank

God, and she has three daughters still at home with her—the two eldest, Florrie and Elsie, having been luckily married to two wretched men, who didn't know what they were incurring by the deed. The pater is jolly too, thanks, and still trying hard to convert the reprobates of Revranches, and as for my brothers, Denis and Alfred have gone out to Manitoba, and Tom is in a mercantile house at Antwerp, so we are pretty well disposed of.”

“And are you comfortable in your situation, Bobby?”

“So, so, Athol. The salary of a banker's clerk does not permit of my ‘keeping the pace’ as I should like to do, but it pays for an occasional cigar, or a pair of gloves, and I make the best of a bad job. Some day I may get something better.”

“And at an early day if *I* can effect it, old boy,” said Athol, laying his hand kindly on the other's shoulder; “you must let me

know just what you are fit for, and I will use all the influence I have in your behalf. I haven't forgotten the days at Revranches, Bobby; I never shall forget them, they were the happiest of my life, and in gratitude to them alone, I would like to do all I can for a friend who was so intimately associated with them."

Poor Bobby was so taken aback by the offer, that he hardly knew how to thank him for it.

"Dear old Athol!" he ejaculated, growing very red in the face, "I can't find any words to say what I want, but it's just like you, and you're the same as ever, that's all."

"And that's more than enough," replied his friend smiling; "besides, your thanks are very premature, Bobby, for I may never be able to fulfil my desire. What are you rising for?"

"I've been here more than an hour," stammered Bobby.

“My dear fellow, I’m not going to let you leave me to-day, that is, unless you have something better to do. You must stay and dine with me at my club, and then we’ll go to a theatre together or a music hall, whichever you prefer, and make a night of it. Come, Bob! I can’t take any refusal. I’ve a touch of the blues this afternoon, and if you leave me to myself, I shall be miserable.”

So the day finished as he had proposed, and all the warmth and geniality of their boyhood was infused into their renewed intercourse. Though as Bobby took his way home at last to the furnished apartments which he called by that name, he could not help wondering (from several little circumstances which had struck him during the evening) whether he had not been a little bit mistaken when he so hastily concluded that Mrs. Fergusson must be altogether wrong.

CHAPTER III.

A WOMAN OF THE WORLD.

It would be difficult in a few brief sentences to convey an idea of the change that surely but gradually passed over the character of Lady Muriel de Crespigny, after the discovery that her husband had deceived her. She had never really loved him—that is to say, she had never esteemed him, which is the only security for the endurance of love—because she had never seen anything in his motives, principles, or disposition, to esteem. But she had believed that as his wife, and the mistress of his establishment, he would uphold her honour and dignity to the world, and he had trampled publicly upon both. He had cast them on the ground as a door-mat to wipe his feet upon,

and at the first blush Muriel had thought she could never forgive him. And when on the impolicy of her decision being pointed out to her by her father, she consented to overlook the outrage done to her feelings, and return to her home in Queen's Gate, they were her lips only that uttered "Yes." Her heart never joined in the affirmative. And from the moment she re-entered her own house, she manifested a perceptible shrinking from her husband. She dreaded to be left alone with him even for a few minutes, and kept close to her step-sister, as though her only safety was by Cecil's side. When, after a visit of several weeks, Miss Seton was recalled to Oakley Court by the mandate of her mother, Lady Muriel filled her place by Lina Walford, who was only too delighted to share in all the luxuries of the Queen's Gate mansion, and accompany her friend wherever she might choose to go. There were times (of course) when the

husband and wife were naturally alone, when Colonel de Crespigny indeed insisted upon having Lady Muriel to himself, but he gained little by the opportunity. She never reproached him again, she did not even repulse his advances, but she never encouraged, and she never rewarded them. She submitted to everything passively, but embraced the earliest chance that presented itself to rid herself of his society, and to a man of Colonel de Crespigny's temperament this was the most galling conduct she could have pursued. She wounded his vanity and self love. He saw that she despised him, and was indifferent to his appreciation of herself, and he would have been less hurt by open recrimination, or violent abuse. It piqued him into taking the worst step he could have done in order to surmount her indifference. He attempted to defend his late action by proving that he had been guilty of far worse ones. He pulled down with one effort all the

barriers he had erected between her innocence and his own polluted life, and displayed it before her horror-stricken eyes in such naked deformity, that she shrunk from him with the utmost repugnance. He began to boast even of the sins he had committed, the lapses from honour of which he had been guilty, the deceptions he had practised, until the poor girl (whose little life at Revranches had been hedged in with dulness and propriety) felt as though she were listening to the revelations of one of the greatest criminals that ever walked this earth. And then de Crespigny, somewhat abashed by the folly he had committed, and finding himself powerless to avert the consequences, or make his young wife regard him with the favour and deference with which she had commenced her married life, sought council from an old enemy of his, the whisky bottle, and on more than one occasion appeared before her in a condition that sent her flying

to her bedroom, where she would lock herself in, in company with Agnes or Rosette, until the whole establishment was cognizant of the fact that "the master was drunk and had nearly frightened her ladyship into fits."

These are the things that break down all the proprieties of life, and turn the marriage union into a hell. These public desecrations of a shrine that should be sacred, this bawling on the house-tops of a secret that should be inviolate, and placing it in the power of one's housemaids and footmen to comment in their vulgar fashion on the blow that breaks the hearts of their employers.

Colonel de Crespigny's half-drunken, half-revengeful revelations of a past life of infidelity and dishonour, and which he boasted of as a career of "good luck," which he owed entirely to his favour with the fair sex, so disgusted Lady Muriel that all chance of their coming to a better understanding with each other vanished.

How was it to be expected (she asked herself) that a man who allowed that he had not been faithful to his first wife would remain true to her? And what guarantee had she that the episode of Mrs. Lorrimer might not be repeated over and over again, until she no longer knew *who* were her friends, and *who* her enemies in disguise?

Such a conviction might have sent some women weeping to their chambers, but it had a contrary effect on Lady Muriel. It *hardened* her. Her disposition was naturally affectionate and easily led—*too* easily indeed, or she would not have been so quickly persuaded to give up Athol Fergusson for the sake of Colonel de Crespigny—but she was also of a very bold and impetuous temper, and when once convinced of a thing it was impossible to turn her. And she had arrived at this point when Lina Walford came to keep her company.

Many of Lina's sayings had been uttered in

an unknown tongue to Muriel in the days they spent together at Paris, but she understood them better now ; although she found there was still something to be learnt from this young woman of the world. They had not been long together before Lady Muriel had told her companion the whole story of her wrongs, for she had a frank and open disposition, and had great difficulty in keeping anything of importance to herself. But Lina was not half so astonished and horrified at the recital as Muriel had anticipated. She arched her dark brows at the most telling parts of the recital, but when it was concluded she burst into a hearty laugh.

“ Oh ! Lina,” cried Lady Muriel reproachfully, “ what is there to laugh at ? I think it is most disgraceful. Fancy that girl Agnes, and Rosette knowing all the time *what* that woman was, whilst *I* was allowing her to kiss me, and taking notice of her horrid boy.

I thought I should have died of shame and mortification. And yet you laugh."

"I wasn't laughing at *you*, dear, believe me. I was thinking what that hideous flabby Mrs. Lorrimer must have looked like when you confronted her. Every colour of the rainbow, I should imagine. Prismatic Mrs. Lorrimer. Well, I can't say much for the colonel's taste. It must be easily satisfied. He could hardly have found an uglier woman in all London."

"But, Lina, fancy his bringing her to stay in the house. Do you think any other man has ever presumed to insult his wife so far?"

"Heaps of them, my dear, only they are too clever to be found out. But I never *did* think Colonel de Crespigny clever. He's a fine big animal, and in this case he has proved himself to be a very blundering one."

"I shall never forgive him," said Muriel decisively.

"Nonsense, my dear; you'll be pottering on all right again in a week or two. If

married people kept up a feud for a matter like this, there wouldn't be a husband and wife on speaking terms in England. After all, what does it matter? Did you expect to get a man all to yourself? Oh, you little goose!"

"I certainly expected to have my dignity upheld in my own establishment," replied Muriel severely.

"Then you must shut your eyes, Muriel, and everybody else will shut theirs too. My dear, you *must* get rid of these old-fashioned ideas about marriage, or you will make your life miserable. It isn't what it used to be, Muriel, if our grandmothers speak the truth. The whole face of society is changed, and morality is at a very low ebb. I doubt if you would find a *really* faithful husband on the face of the earth. They've all had their slips and their trips, for which, doubtless, they are very sorry, but which they say nothing about unless they should happen to be discovered."

“I don’t believe *every* man would prove to be so dishonourable,” said Muriel thoughtfully. “I have known *one* at least, who I am sure would remain true in every relation of life.”

“Ah! still hankering after the Revranches lover, *ma belle*?” cried Miss Walford. “Do you see him oftener now, then, and is he still faithful and *dévoué*?”

“I *never* see him,” replied Lady Muriel in a low voice. “I don’t even know where he is, but I believe his regiment is somewhere abroad. I don’t suppose we shall ever meet again, and it is best we should not.”

“Oh, nonsense!” exclaimed her listener. “I would like to have a nice little sum on the odds that you knock your heads together again before long. The world is too small for eternal separations, and then you will be the best of friends, and comfort each other under your mutual afflictions. Both in romance and reality, the old lover is always

coming to the front again, you know. Colonel de Crespigny has had his innings, and it will be your turn next. Only you must be careful not to go too far."

"What do you mean?" said Muriel. "How could I see Athol and be his friend even if we *did* meet again? My husband knows all about him, and that we were once engaged to be married to each other. He would never permit me to ask him to the house."

Lina shrugged her shoulders.

"If your ladyship intends always to ask your husband's leave before you decide on a little distraction for yourself, you may as well give up the idea of having a gentleman friend at once. It is easy to see that it would not take much to make Colonel de Crespigny jealous. Men who are careless themselves are invariably the most particular about their wives. But I don't think he asked *your* leave before introducing

Mrs. Lorrimer into the house, and my principle is ‘tit for tat.’”

“*If* I should ever meet Athol again (which is not likely),” said Muriel mournfully, “I certainly *shall* speak to him, because there is something which I feel he ought to know in justice to myself. My father deceived me, Lina, in order to make me write and give him up. He told me he was already on the way to India, when he was all the time at Woolwich, and had I known that I *never* would have written the letter.”

“It was just as well you didn’t, then, Muriel,” rejoined Lina with perfect *sang-froid*, “for it might have prevented your making the excellent match you have. You must learn to look on it in that light, my dear. Take all the pleasure you can in this world. Enjoy your wealth, and your luxuries, and your amusements, and regard your husband as the inevitable *désagrément* attached to their possession. That will enable you to bear

with him better than anything else. And then, when your friend turns up again, you will find a great solace in his companionship. There's no friendship, my dear Muriel, like that between two old lovers. There is so much romance mixed with it that it retains its flavour to the very last."

"But I have told you that Athol is away and may not be home for years," replied Muriel, a little pettishly.

"Well, can't you take another meanwhile, just to keep your hand in? It won't hurt the beloved, you know. 'What the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve for.' You want excitement, my poor Muriel. A little flirtation would do you good."

"I don't think I quite know *how* to flirt, Lina."

"Then you'll find plenty of men ready to teach you, if you will but hold up your hand. Seriously though, Muriel, the season is close upon us, and when that has com-

menced you will have no time to fret over such rubbish as this Lorrimer affair. You should be thankful rather than otherwise that it has happened. Don't you see that it has given you your liberty? The colonel can't well complain of anything *you* do, after that. You have always got a plaister wherewith to stop his mouth. If *I* were married I should never rest till I had found out my husband had been unfaithful to me, for then I should snap my fingers at him for the rest of my life."

Lady Muriel sighed deeply. This was not the sort of marriage she had once pictured to herself, and though it might be true, it was *very* painful.

But Lina Walford's advice had its effect upon her all the same. She grew to believe that her friend's view of the subject was the correct one, and the conviction made her reckless. What did it signify *what* she did, if truth and honour were drugs in the matri-

monial market, and no one (who knew the world) would give her credit for remaining pure and faithful and true. It is a matter for speculation if men are aware how much their own conduct influences that of their wives, and how many a woman has succumbed to the temptations afforded her, simply because she knows her husband to have been first untrue. I do not believe in the vicious creatures occasionally portrayed by novelists, who go wrong for the love of vice, but I *do* believe in the unprincipled but warm-hearted woman, who, finding her affections have been betrayed, rushes from the mere agony of the discovery into the first pair of arms held out to comfort her, and in that other one, who, finding herself impotent to remedy the evil, or to make it punishable, takes the bit between her teeth and revenges herself in the only possible way. I believe that, could statistics on the subject be obtained, it would be found that in nine cases

out of ten of a married woman proving false to her vows, she has had reason to believe that her husband has been so before her.

Lady Muriel de Crespigny did not credit all she heard at first, but little by little it worked itself into her mind until all her girlish ideas were altered, and she had lost faith in everything that was good and true. Her husband's conduct greatly contributed to effect this distressing change. He seemed to take a pleasure at this period in shocking her with the stories of his past life, as though he would make the present look almost pure by the light of that which was gone. And when he found that she was shocked no longer, but only showed the most utter indifference to anything he may have said or done, he grew brutally enraged, and blurted out the coarse truth that he had been faithless to her also, and would be so again, and defied her to take any action

against him, for the law of England allowed her no remedy.

If the legislators who passed the law in so lopsided a condition could only hear the unworthy use which is sometimes made of it, they would acknowledge that it admitted of improvement. No one, who had only seen Colonel de Crespigny in society, where he smiled on all around him, as if it were impossible that he could ever lose his temper, would have recognized him in one of these violent outbursts, when he forgot even the common decencies of humanity.

So, from despising and loathing him, Lady Muriel grew positively to *hate* him, and he read it in her withering looks, and the cold tone of contempt in which she addressed him. And when he had satisfied himself that she no longer cared for *him*, Colonel de Crespigny began to suspect that she must care for some one else. There are men, so intensely conceited, that it is impossible to

make them believe that anything but a counter attraction can turn a woman's thoughts away from themselves.

The London season now dawned, and (as Lina Walford had predicted) Muriel's days and nights were fully occupied. The end for which Colonel de Crespigny had married her was amply realized. Her aristocratic connections brought a little crowd of titled men and women to worship at the shrine erected by her husband's riches, and the dinners and evening parties given at the mansion in Queen's Gate began to be quoted as amongst the best of the season. Not that the girlish hostess had anything to do with them. They were settled, and arranged, and carried out without any reference to herself, and all she was asked to do, was to look pretty and be handsomely attired, and affable to her guests. And so far Lady Muriel acquitted herself to perfection. Although her husband could lower himself to swear in her

presence, and indulge in ribaldry, and even call her by offensive names, he still maintained an immense pride in her personal appearance (or rather, in his own possession of her), and wanted to hear himself always credited with having the loveliest and best dressed wife in town. He took her out everywhere. Before the season was half over the beautiful features of Lady Muriel de Crespigny were known and recognized alike in the street, the opera house, the theatre, and the ball-room. But the more she was admired and sought after, the more the colonel's jealousy of her grew, until it almost amounted to insanity. He could not bear to see her laughing or talking with any man, however old or uninteresting, and the fact of an acquaintance appearing at her "At Homes" on two successive occasions, was sufficient to make him suspicious.

"Who is that round-faced, sandy-haired young fellow, who was whispering to you

over the tea table this afternoon, Muriel?" he demanded one evening. "Confounded bad manners in the cad. Where did you pick him up?"

"His name is Holmes. He is an old Revranches friend of mine whom I met at the Cranstons'. He was *not* whispering to me, and he is *not* a cad," replied Muriel indifferently, as she returned to her book.

"Oh, a *Revranches* friend," sneered the colonel. "Well, you'd better tell your Revranches friend to behave himself, or I may take a fancy some day to kick him out of my house."

"That would hurt no one, I imagine, so much as yourself. And Bobby is pretty muscular. He might take a fancy to kick, as well as you."

"It's the second time he's been here within the fortnight, and *I won't have it*," exclaimed the colonel angrily. "I won't have a lot of young fellows coming here, and sitting in

your pocket all the afternoon. It isn't respectable. Do you hear what I say?"

"Perfectly. I should think the whole house might hear you. But if your wishes are to be carried out, I had better give up my 'At Homes.' I cannot tell my friends how often they are to come, and how often to stay away."

"But you needn't call the man '*Bobby*,'" said her husband, pacing up and down the room.

"I did so for ten years in Revranches. It is too late to change it now."

"D—n Revranches," exclaimed the colonel. The very name had operated on him, like a red rag held before a bull, ever since he had heard Lady Muriel's appeal to her father for having separated her from Athol Fergusson. He had begun to suspect that there was more in that early attachment than he had ever dreamt of, and that the memory alone of her first lover might prove a serious

bar between his wife and himself. When he began to swear Lady Muriel rose and left the room. It was the usual way now by which she signified her disapproval of his behaviour. She was weary of quarrels and jars. All she wanted was to be left in peace to live out the remainder of her life as she best might. When a wife has arrived at this stage of thinking, it is time to hoist the danger signal. It is so very unlikely (especially if she should be young and pretty) that her male friends will allow her to carry out her design. All lives need excitement in their different ways, in order to go on living, and the natural excitement for the young is love.

Bobby Holmes had certainly been very ready to accept and take advantage of Lady Muriel's cordial invitation to her house. It was delightful to find that (though raised so far above him) she still remembered her old playmate, and made more of him than she

did of the titled ladies and sprigs of nobility that crowded her *salons*. Her “afternoons” were rather stiff affairs. There was no cosy tea table to gather round, whilst the hostess dispensed her little cups of tea, and the gentlemen handed about the cakes and thin bread and butter, and let them tumble into the ladies’ laps. Powdered flunkies in gorgeous liveries, solemnly paraded the rooms, bearing silver trays of chocolate and coffee, ices, bonbons, and macaroons, whilst professional singers were engaged to sing songs which no one listened to, and the guests stood so closely together that their elbows were sticking into each other’s sides. Yet there was always a little haven to be found somewhere, formed of a settee and two or three chairs, where Lady Muriel, surrounded by her girl friends, held her court, and gave audience to her most intimate acquaintance. Bobby generally contrived to find his way there, and was always warmly welcomed,

and invited to make himself agreeable. But though Lady Muriel laughed and talked (sometimes almost hilariously), Bobby fancied he detected a false ring in her mirth, and that she was not altogether so happy as one might imagine her to be. She certainly seemed to possess everything that women hold most dear, but he found that, if he gazed steadily in her eyes, she was unable to meet his own, and that whenever he spoke of Revranches she became nervous, and laughed in a jerky fashion that was very unpleasant to listen to. His curiosity became excited. He had been thinking both of her and of Athol Fergusson a great deal since he had encountered the latter, and he wondered if Lady Muriel knew that her old friend was in town. Here, at least, no embargo had been laid on him of silence, and he became anxious to try the experiment. But he was too tender-hearted to broach the subject before her acquaintances, so he

waited until late one afternoon, when the rooms were nearly empty, and he and she were sitting apart on an ottoman together, and out of hearing of the remaining guests.

“Do you ever think of Revranches now, Lady Muriel?” he commenced suddenly.

“Often,” she answered, in a low voice.

“We used to abuse it when we were there,” continued Bobby, “but I fancy a few of us would be glad enough to find ourselves back again. What a grand solemnity and gloom seemed to hang over the dear old place, so different from the glare and noise and constant movement of the modern Babylon. Do you remember our games at cricket, Lady Muriel? What a capital fielder you were.”

“I remember,” said Muriel, with glistening eyes.

“What a splendid cricketer old Athol was, too. I wonder if he has given up his field sports. He was good at everything of

the kind. Do you see him often, Lady Muriel?"

She turned her large grey eyes upon him, with a look of incredulous amazement.

"*See him.* How can I see him, Bobby? He is in India with his regiment."

"Indeed he is not. He is in London, living in chambers in Piccadilly. He came into his uncle's baronetcy and left the army some months ago. Of course you have heard that he is Sir Athol Fergusson now, but it hasn't changed him in the least bit. Dear old Athol."

But long before his sentence was concluded Bobby felt an unusual pressure on his arm. Muriel had laid her hand upon it, and was digging her fingers into his flesh. He turned towards her. Her face had become ashy-white, and her eyes were staring at him, as though they were fixed in her head.

"Don't mind," she ejaculated hurriedly; "I must hold you, or I shall scream." And

then she added in a low, gasping voice, “*Athol is in England*, close to me. Does he know that I am here? Have you mentioned my name to him?”

Bobby felt as if he had sprung a mine. He had only meant to ascertain if Lady Muriel were as indifferent to his friend as his friend affected to be to her; and here she was, holding on to him like grim death, and looking at him with her beautiful face aglow with excitement, and her eyes overbrimming with tears.

“Well, I am not quite sure,” he stammered. “I think we *did* speak of you one day, but I really forget what was said. Athol has been seeing the world, you know, since we were all together in Revranches, and perhaps he has forgotten——”

He didn’t know what he was saying. There was no attempt at deception with him here. Lady Muriel was evidently as interested in Athol Fergusson as she had ever been.

“He cannot have forgotten *me*,” she interposed hastily. “Ah, Bobby, you don’t know how fond we were of one another. But tell me *everything*. How does he look? Is he the same as ever? And is he rich? Has the change in his circumstances made any change in him?”

“None at all, outwardly. He has the same pleasant grave look he always had, and the same genial manner. He is very well off indeed, I believe, though I don’t know his exact income. But his mother and sister live at his country seat, Bromieshall, near Richmond, and Athol himself has the most luxurious chambers in town.”

“Bromieshall!” exclaimed Lady Muriel, hysterically. “Does Bromieshall belong to Athol? Why, it is a magnificent place close to Oakley Court! And he is rich. And they made me give him up because he was so poor! Oh, what a fool I was!”

And here she was in such danger of break-

ing down that Bobby became alarmed for the consequences.

“Dear Lady Muriel,” he whispered hurriedly, “*do* control yourself, for heaven’s sake! The colonel is looking this way. How I wish I had never mentioned the subject to you.”

Muriel left her seat quickly, and passed out into the balcony, which was sheltered by an awning, and filled with growing flowers, and after the delay of a minute, Bobby followed her there. She was not crying now. Her eyes were dry and shining like two stars, and her cheeks were feverishly red.

“I am all right again, Bobby,” she said in her old girlish way, “and I am very glad you told me. I might have met him some day without preparation, and that would have been much worse. I cannot ask him to this house,” she continued rapidly, in a very low voice, and with her head bent

close to his, "for many reasons, but I *must* see him again. You are his friend, Bobby, are you not, and you are mine. Tell him I will be at the Broad Walk, in Kensington Gardens, to-morrow, at four o'clock, and he is to be *sure* and meet me there. Will you tell him?"

Bobby did not feel as if he was doing exactly the right thing, in taking a message from a married woman to a former lover, but still there was no real harm in the appointment, and Athol must please himself about keeping it. So he promised Lady Muriel that he would do her bidding. Then she began to tease him after the fashion of girls, to say how, and when it would be done.

"Shall you see him to-night, Bobby? Will you go directly after you leave here? Ah! how I wish I could go with you. And when shall I have an answer? Do you think he will be *sure* to come? And will you

tell him everything that I have said and done ? ”

“ Lady Muriel,” replied Bobby gravely, “ I will deliver the message you have trusted to me, but Athol must take you the answer himself. I had better not come here again so soon. I should get into a terrible scrape with the colonel, if he were to hear of my interference in the matter.”

“ Oh, the *colonel* ! ” repeated Muriel, with a scornful curl of her lip. “ *He* has no right to object to anything *I* do. He never consults *me* with regard to his own proceedings. But there will be no need for me to see you again, Bobby. Athol will come and meet me, and I shall be able to give him the explanation I have been keeping for him so long. Oh, dear ! what a time it will seem until to-morrow.”

At that moment some of her guests approached to wish her good-bye, and Lady Muriel was obliged to return to her duties.

Bobby left the house, rather uneasy in his mind. He had promised to carry the message to Athol, and he would do it, but he was rather uncertain of his friend's approval of his errand. However, he consoled himself with the idea that it was not his fault, and he walked straight down from Queen's Gate to Piccadilly to get the business over at once. Sir Athol happened to be at home, and Bobby, in his nervousness, blurted out the message without any preparation.

“By the way, old fellow, I've just come from Queen's Gate—Lady Muriel de Crespigny's, you know—and we were talking of you, and she told me to come here, and ask you to meet her to-morrow afternoon at four o'clock in the Broad Walk in Kensington Gardens, as she is very anxious to see you again.” He expected to hear Sir Athol make some disclaimer at the proposal, but he did not utter a word. Dead silence reigned.

after the delivery of the message, whilst Bobby stood, twirling his hat, round and round in his hands. At last he could bear it no longer.

“That’s all,” he said hurriedly; “she made me *promise* to bring the message, and I couldn’t well refuse her, and so I’ve done it; but of course you will please yourself, Athol—and I hope you are not annoyed with me for having been made the bearer of it.”

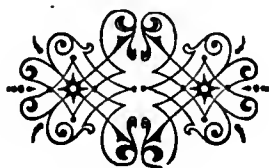
“Won’t you sit down a minute, Bobby, and have a seltzer and brandy?” asked Sir Athol quietly.

“Well, I don’t mind,” said Bobby; “but look here, Athol, you won’t think, will you? that this is any fault of mine. We began to talk of Revranches together, and——”

“Please to drop the subject, Bobby. Of course you were quite right to do the lady’s bidding, and now I’ve heard the message, and we’ll say no more about it. By the

way, I wish you'd come down with me to Bromieshall next Sunday. You have no idea how lovely the country is just now. And it is getting abominably hot in London."

"You're right there, Athol. You should have felt the heat this afternoon in Lady Muriel's drawing-rooms——I mean," cried Bobby, pulling himself up short, "that I shall be charmed to visit Bromieshall whenever you will be so good as to take me there."



CHAPTER IV.

REPULSED.

LADY MURIEL spent the remainder of the day in a state of feverish impatience and excitement. She had believed that all the interest of her life was over. She had thought (with the simplicity of her nineteen years) that because marriage had pulled the veil that hid the naked deformity of the world from before her eyes, the rest of her existence would be passed in lamenting the false step she had taken. She had told her friends Cecil Seton, and Lina Walford, that she should never care again for dress, or society, or amusement, and that because one man had turned out to be totally different from what she had anticipated, she should never give a thought to any of his sex again.

But now—suddenly—a great piece of news had come to her, that seemed to change the whole aspect of the world at once. Athol Fergusson was near her again. He was not dwelling in that fabulous India, whither she had in fancy traced his steps. He was not destined to live, an exile from his native land, for ten, or perhaps twenty years, and then return, aged, yellow, and morose, so as to be unrecognizable by the friends of his youth.

He was here, close at hand—within a stone's-throw of her home—the same dear Athol, who but a year previously had held her to his heart, and promised to remain true to her for ever. She would be able to see him—to explain away the perfidy of which he (perhaps) accused her, to make him understand how her father had forced her into a marriage with Colonel de Crespigny on the threat of sending her back to Revranches, to pine in solitude for any

number of years. A thousand thoughts rushed through her brain of what she would say, and do, when she saw this dear friend of her maidenhood again, and there was not one picture mixed with them of an unforgiving lover, who refused to listen to her explanations, or to accept her proffered advances. Colonel de Crespigny was engaged out to a bachelor's dinner that evening, and Lady Muriel had all the time to herself to think over the coming interview in Kensington Gardens. She hardly slept all night from excitement, and when the morning broke she thought the afternoon would never come. Agnes—whose quick, suspicious nature was ever on the alert, to note the various changes in her young mistress's moods—detected at once the unusual restlessness in her manner, and the anxiety she displayed to be dressed to the best advantage.

“I think I will wear that new costume of sad green, Agnes. No, I won't. I'll dress

in black. But after all, I look best in white, don't I? I remember once in Rev-ranches —— ”

“What, *miladi* ? ”

“Nothing—nothing. Only give me the white costume I wore on Sunday, and the white hat and feathers. I think it suits me better than any other dress.”

“*Miladi* is doubtless going to make an important visit.”

“That is just it, Agnes, and I want to look my best. Is the carriage round ? ”

“Yes, *miladi*, it waits.”

“Then I will go. What time is it? Five minutes to four. Oh, how my heart beats. I think I must take a little *sal volatile* and water before I start. I feel as if I were going to faint.” She sat down again for a minute, and Agnes brought her the desired remedies.

“It would be ten thousand pities for *miladi* to be taken ill whilst making an im-

portant visit," she remarked sententiously. Upon which Lady Muriel (conscience stricken) knocked the medicine to one side, and declaring she was quite well again, ran down stairs. She drove through the park for a few minutes, and then desired the coachman to set her down at the entrance of the Broad Walk, and drive round and wait for her at the other end. She hardly dared to raise her eyes while her servants were in sight, but as soon as they had disappeared, she scanned the place of rendezvous carefully. She felt sure that Sir Athol would be there before her—standing a little apart perhaps under one of the trees to avoid recognition by any one but herself—and that in another minute they would meet again. But though her eyes were sharp, and the atmosphere was clear, she could not discern him. Several groups of fancifully dressed children, with their nursemaids, were running about, playing at ball, or hide and seek, and

one or two young men, apparently students, with books in their hands, were pacing up and down, reading to themselves; but, from one end of the walk to the other, there was no Athol Fergusson. Muriel's heart sunk a little. No woman likes to be kept waiting for a man, however small her interest in him may be, and in a case like this each second seems magnified into an hour. She commenced to walk slowly towards the Bayswater Road, where she had ordered her carriage to wait for her, sitting down occasionally on the benches to rest herself, and casting shy glances around, to see if she was observed. The young men students certainly *did* observe her. Their books could not hold their own against her fair youthful beauty and her somewhat striking attire, and they kept walking in very small circles round the bench, whilst they wondered who she could be, and what she wanted there. Lady Muriel at last becoming conscious of their scrutiny,

left her seat and recommenced her stroll, but she had nearly reached the end of the walk, and still there were no signs of Athol. What could have detained him? Had Bobby delivered her message, and if so, had he made a mistake about the time, or the place? Bobby was never noted for sharpness, even in the old Revranches days. Muriel blamed herself now for not having written a note to Athol and sent Bobby to deliver it. A couple of lines in pencil would have been sufficient, for she was *certain* that if Athol had properly understood what was required of him, he would have been there. So she determinately told herself; but, at the same time, there was a counter fear knocking at her heart, lest her old lover should have been offended beyond conciliation. Oh, it was *impossible*! Lady Muriel tried hard to recall the exact words that had passed between them on the day they had parted in the presence of her father,

but subsequent events had completely erased them from her memory, and she could only wonder if they were harsher than she had imagined them to be.

She lingered in the gardens for a full hour after the time she had appointed for the meeting, and then, not knowing *what* to think and feeling very much inclined to cry, she re-entered her carriage and took a drive out to Finchley, whilst she wrestled with her thoughts and tried to find a possible reason for the disappointment she had encountered. She was unsuccessful, however, and returned to Queen's Gate, feeling very mortified and considerably out of temper. Agnes observed the alteration that had taken place in her mistress's demeanour, and remarked on it as she dressed her for dinner.

"*Miladi* is rather *ennuyée* by these important visits," she observed.

"Yes," replied Lady Muriel. "No, I

didn't call anywhere. I drove into the country, which is more *ennuyant* still."

But Agnes Prudhomme (who was the leading lady of the servants' hall, and set all the liveried hearts on fire) had heard the whole account of how the carriage had waited for an hour for her ladyship at the end of the Broad Walk, before the evening was over.

Meanwhile Muriel, being unable to communicate with Bobby (of whose bachelor address she was even ignorant), wrote a note to Lina Walford begging her to spend the next day with her, and to this bosom friend she confided the whole history of her disappointment.

But the lively Lina never regarded a subject from the same point of view as Muriel. She passed over the neglected appointment in Kensington Gardens as a matter of no consequence, to congratulate herself on the perspicuity she had shown in pro-

phesying that the Revranches lover would turn up again.

“Didn’t I tell you, Muriel, that you and Mr. Fergusson would knock your heads together before long? Oh, my dear, the world is very small when all’s said and done. And fancy his being a baronet, too, and wealthy into the bargain. How nice. I hate to have a poor man dangling after me. They can never make you a present without your feeling guilty.”

“But, Lina, *why* shouldn’t he have met me yesterday? It wasn’t such a great thing to ask of him.”

“My dear, there may have been a dozen good reasons to prevent him from doing as he wished. He may have had a previous engagement, or perhaps he was out when Mr. Holmes called, or the poor fellow may be ill. Give him a chance, Muriel. He would have come quick enough if he could. I shouldn’t wonder if Master Bobby was round

here this afternoon with a message, or a note for you. Anyhow, my dear, I congratulate you. A little flirtation with the old love will be a salve for your disappointment over the new."

"Oh! Lina, it will never go so far as a flirtation. It wouldn't be right, and I am sure Athol would not consent to it. You don't know how good he is."

"A bit of a prig, it seems to me, Muriel. And pray, why shouldn't you have your particular friend as well as Lady Lyttonby or Mrs. Oscar Norton? All the world knows that they are flirts, but no one dares to say anything worse about them. I can't conceive any more absorbing interest than that of a married woman in her former lovers. They are always so devoted, poor things, and so grateful for any notice, and they don't grow tired of you (as husbands do), but are always on the *qui vive* for what will happen next. I am sure they must be quite charming."

“ I shall never rest,” sighed Muriel, “ till I have cleared myself in Athol’s eyes. He must think me so heartless—so mercenary. If I cannot manage to see him alone, and speak to him, my heart will break.”

“ Nonsense, my dear. It’s much tougher than you give it credit for. And as for meeting Sir Athol Fergusson, why, you will have hundreds of opportunities before the season’s over. A young man of fashion is everywhere. You have only to keep your eyes open and you’ll see him fast enough.”

It is not certain that Lady Muriel actually set to work to act upon her friend’s advice, but there is no doubt that, if we know a person to be in the same place as ourselves, we are far more likely to encounter him. Believing Smith to be in Bengal, we may pass Smith himself in the street without recognition, but having met Smith once, and spoken to him, we find ourselves returning his nod every other day in the week. So it was with Lady

Muriel. Bobby Holmes did not come near her again, and day after day, she drove about Regent Street and Piccadilly in her victoria looking eagerly from side to side in order to catch a glimpse of Athol Fergusson.

At last she saw him. It was in New Bond Street, and he was walking on the pavement just in front of her carriage, which had got into the line for the Park. She recognized him at once. He was dressed in fashionable clothes, and there was more of the bearing of a man about him than in former days, but she could not mistake the clear-cut profile, nor the sweet serious mouth, that were turned towards her for a moment in the block. If he saw her or not, she never knew, but the next minute, he turned into a jeweller's shop. Without one thought for the rashness of the action, Lady Muriel drew the check string, and jumping out of the victoria, rushed after him. She had only one idea in her head, that Athol was there, and she must speak

to him. The shop was rather dark after coming in from the glorious July sunshine, but she could see him leaning over the counter at the further end. Without a single warning she went up to him, and laid her hand upon his arm.

“Athol!” she exclaimed breathlessly, “I want to speak to you.”

He turned and looked at her without the slightest emotion, although all the colour forsook his face, and his features became set and stern.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, with his hat in his hand, “I am not aware that I have the honour of your acquaintance.”

Lady Muriel stared at him in helpless amazement. There could be no mistake this time. She was sure he recognized her, as perfectly as she recognized him.

“Athol,” she repeated in a lower tone, “you must know *me*—Muriel.”

There was a plea for pity and forgiveness

in her voice now, but he would not acknowledge it.

“I think you must take me for some one else,” he repeated; “I have not the slightest recollection of you.”

And with a low bow, he turned to the counter again, and commenced to examine the ornaments upon it. For a moment Muriel felt stunned by the open rebuff, and then she ran out of the shop without another word.

Her carriage was waiting for her. She charged it, with blinded eyes, and stumbled into her seat with ungraceful haste.

“Where to, my lady?” demanded the footman, as he arranged the rug over her knees.

“Anywhere — anywhere!” she answered with a sob in her throat, and then (becoming conscious of betraying herself) she amended the order.

“To the Park of course. Didn’t I say so

when we started ? ” But before they reached it, Lady Muriel had changed her mind again, and gave the order for “Home.” She was too well known in the Park, she thought to herself. People would be stopping to speak to her, and she had no heart for conversation. All she wanted was, to be alone, and undisturbed—to get by herself, and try and solve this unexpected difficulty that had arisen in her path. As soon as the carriage stopped at her own door, she flew upstairs, and locked herself into her room. She would not admit either Agnes or Rosette. She had a violent headache (she declared), and wished for nothing but solitude and rest. And it was no untruth. Her head *did* ache, as it had seldom ached before ; for her vanity and selfishness and confidence had received a shock they had little expected, and which they were still unwilling to believe.

Could it be *possible* that Athol Fergusson had *cut her dead* in a public place ?—that she

had forced herself into the cruel position of being openly repulsed, and told to her face that she was a stranger whilst all the time she could see by his eyes that he had recognized her at the first glance?

It was not from an error then that she had been kept waiting for a whole hour in the Kensington Gardens. He had received her invitation (she felt certain of that now), and he had refused to accept it, because he did not wish to see or speak to her again, for the same reason indeed, that he had denied all knowledge of her that day. Oh, who had made such mischief between them that Athol Fergusson should refuse to be even her friend? Muriel had not taken into account the great force of her lover's moral character—the deep-thinking brain which had made him so different from, and so superior to most young men of his age—and the strong views of right and wrong which he held upon all subjects. She was

trying to treat him as many frivolous women treat men in the present day—playing fast and loose with him in fact—snubbing him one moment, and whistling him back the next, and Sir Athol Fergusson was not a man to be played fast and loose with. He had loved Lady Muriel from the bottom of his soul—so much so indeed, that he believed he could never love any woman in this world again—and she had been false to him, and destroyed his faith in the whole of her sex. He had been perfectly aware she was in London, but he had had no desire to see her—nor to go in the way of seeing her—and the idea of her making a secret appointment with him, just to prove she retained her former power, was in his sight a most contemptible thing. He told himself that if she were free and the only woman left in the world, he would never marry her now. Still, he had not such complete faith in his own strength as

to run the risk of placing himself in her way again. He had believed that he could meet her, and speak to her, without pain—so great was the measure of his scorn for the weakness she had shown concerning him—yet the encounter in the jeweller's shop left its traces upon him, as well as upon her. When she had appeared in that bewildering fashion, and spoken to him so authoritatively, as if her will *must* be his law, he had felt strong enough to resist her in the only way in his power—by professing complete forgetfulness. But when she had left him again, he became conscious that he had done great violence to his feelings.

The hand with which he examined the jeweller's collection had visibly trembled, and his choice of an ornament for his sister's birthday had been made at last, with very little discretion. And after the purchase was concluded, Sir Athol also had

gone to his home and spent the rest of the afternoon in painful thought. He forced himself to go out in the evening (for such thoughts he knew were not good for him) and tried to shake off the remembrance of the day's encounter, and his own depression, by going to the theatre. But Lady Muriel would not allow him to reap the benefit of his own fortitude. When he returned to his chambers, late at night, a letter (which had arrived by the last post) lay upon his table. He took it up mechanically, but as he glanced at the irregular girlish handwriting, all the blood flew into his face, and the old blush (which had so long deserted him) suffused it from brow to chin. And yet he frowned. It was evident the reception of the letter gave him no pleasure.

“Why has she written to me?” he pondered as he turned the envelope over and over in his hands. “What can she have to

say, but what will give her pain to write, and I to read? She is married—nothing can alter that—and I have neither the wish, nor the strength, to be her friend, or the friend of the man who took her from me—who *bought* her, I should say, over my head. And what have I in common with a woman who deserted me in my poverty, and stood by in silence whilst I was turned out of her father's house—with my faith wrecked in all good things. I will not read her letter. It can only recall the past, and make the old wound bleed afresh."

He lighted the candle, and was about to burn the epistle, when something stayed his hand.

"And yet, after all, have I the right to burn it unread? Is it not tantamount to stopping my ears if she spoke to me? I repulsed her to-day, it is true; but that was in public, and this is in private, and none of my own seeking. No! I will not be such

a prig as to refuse to read it, and if it hurts me further—well, I suppose I am strong enough to bear it.”

So he opened Muriel's letter (rather roughly it must be said), and read as follows :

“DEAREST ATHOL,—I thought Bobby could not have delivered my message to you last Tuesday, but your conduct to-day has convinced me you have some reason for not wishing to be even my friend. Oh, Athol, who has set you against me? I am very, *very* unhappy. I know you have cause to be angry with me—for marrying another man—but if you knew the pressure that was put upon me, and how deeply I have regretted it since, I am sure you would pity and forgive me. And it is in order to explain to you something about this very thing, that I have been anxious to meet you. Athol! cannot we be friends? I am

sure if you remember the dear old days at Revranches, you will not think it too much for me to ask. I dare not write in a letter all I would say to you ; but send me a note by Bobby, to tell me when and where I can meet you, and I will explain everything that now perhaps seems hard.—Ever yours affectionately, MURIEL.”

It was not a very discreet letter for any woman to send, who was uncertain how her sentiments would be received ; but Lady Muriel had written it in her trouble, and Sir Athol saw that it was genuine. But the more it was so, the more he knew it behoved him to take no notice of it, even to himself. But as the dark-blue eyes perused it for the second time, they were dimmed with tears.

“Poor child,” he thought, “can it be possible that she speaks the truth, and that her grand marriage has brought her no

happiness? And had she but had the strength and faith to wait for a little time, what an alteration she would have seen. But it is of no use thinking of that now. She must reap as she has sown. No, Muriel, we can never be even friends! There are some hearts that cannot accept less than they are honestly entitled to, and mine is one of them. You must go through life as best you can now, without me. I must have *all*—or none—and ‘all’ is beyond my reach.”

He twisted up the letter, and burned it, until there remained nothing but ashes.

“It is best so,” he said, with a sigh. “That is what she has done with my love. She must accept my silence as her answer.”

And so Lady Muriel waited, day after day—without receiving a word or a line from Athol Fergusson.

CHAPTER V.

A DANGEROUS CONFIDANTE.

It has been asserted, and with the utmost truth, that women love more with the head than the heart, and that their imagination will hold them captive long after their common sense bids them go free. It is the reason that they so much oftener make mistakes in marriage than men, or that (having made a mistake) they cannot find any palliation for it, but sit down, with their whole lives broken up at once. When a woman falls in love she dreams and dreams, until every good quality in the man, mental or physical, is idealized into a hundred times its real value. She turns her lover into a god, and when her dream is dispelled there is no power of consolation for her in his

feet of clay. Some women—the happiest women of all—never have their eyes opened to the day of their death, but die believing that Jones, or Brown, or Robinson can never be improved—not even when they meet again in Heaven.

When Muriel was convinced at last, by her former lover's silence and rebuffs, that he was resolved to break off the acquaintanceship between them, *she* began to dream. She had not done so hitherto. The love episode in Revranches she had received as it really occurred. She had been too simple and child-like then to lie awake at night for sweet love's sake ; too ignorant of the world of men to be able to compare her lover with any other of his sex ; too blissfully unconscious of trouble to regard him as a shield against misery, and insult, and deceit. But now everything was changed around her. *Now* she knew what it was to be linked to a man whom she not only

despised but feared, to be daily subjected to coarseness from which she shrank, to blasphemy and abuse such as she had never heard nor imagined in her young life before. And in the face of this bitter experience, the remembrance of Athol Fergusson's pure and boyish affection, of those passionate kisses in which no thought of sensuality was mingled, and those ardent vows of love which bore the impress of a life's fidelity came back to torture her for having turned her heaven to a hell.

No wonder he would neither speak nor write to her—she who had lied to him with her lips, and her eyes, and her hands, every time they strolled together on the dear old Ramparts of Revranches !

When the days passed, one after the other, until they multiplied themselves into weeks and brought no word nor sign from Athol Fergusson, Lady Muriel dreamed of the happy past and the hopeless future,

until she had worked herself into a state of despair. She would lie for hours on her sofa—or her bed—thinking over every trifling minutiae of their acquaintance, from the day she had met him, a handsome blushing stripling in his mother's house, to the evening they had stood together in the dark, outside the gates of the *Château des Lauriers*, and exchanged their farewell kisses for the last, last time. Ah! if she had only known that it really was *the last*! She retraced in fancy the misery she had felt at being borne away from Revranches; the days in Paris, which had first dragged so heavily and then flown so lightly; Athol's silence, which had greatly helped to wean her from him; and finally, her return home: the coldness she experienced at Oakley Court, and the flattery and incense to her beauty which had intoxicated her, till she hardly knew what she was doing until she found herself the wife of Colonel de Crespigny.

And then, the awakening—the bitter awakening from that troubled dream which had sealed her fate. Why had she ever let go the dear young hand which had clasped hers so firmly and promised to keep it so all through their lives?

She thought of Athol as she had seen him standing in her father's house, proud and reproachful, too proud to say one word to make the earl or herself swerve from the decision at which they had arrived, but with his deep blue solemn eyes fixed on hers with a look which she should never forget again as long as she lived—a look which spoke volumes of reproach and scorn and unutterable love, all blended together. Lady Muriel used to tell herself in those days that she would thankfully die if Athol could only bend over her with one of his old Revranches looks of love and trust, and seal her death with a kiss of forgiveness.

She nearly wept herself blind, thinking

over these things and hating herself for the part she had taken in them; and when her husband, noticing her altered looks, would make some rough allusion to her beauty being the best part of her, she hated him too.

She could get no consolation in her trouble out of any one. Cecil Seton she was ashamed to confide in, and she had begun to fear the active tongue of Lina Walford, who had already made light of several of her confidences. And Bobby Holmes seemed to have deserted her. The fact is (although the matter had not even been alluded to between them) Bobby had an intuition that Sir Athol had never kept that appointment in the Kensington Gardens, and he was afraid to go near Lady Muriel again for fear of being questioned on the subject. And at this juncture an unfortunate *contre-temps* occurred—unfortunate, that is to say, for Lady Muriel. *Madame Rosette*, her head

lady's maid, was obliged to leave Queen's Gate on account of illness, and Agnes Prudhomme was temporarily promoted to fill her place. And yet why should one say of any circumstance in this world that it is "unfortunate," since we have no means of deciding how much worse our lives might have otherwise been, nor, indeed, if we have any means at our control of making or marring our fate? Is not every little incident (however unimportant in appearance) but part of a whole? How much more so, then, the great pains and pleasures that go to make up our existence? The wise man said (though I never could understand why Solomon should be termed *the* wise man *par excellence*, considering that he did some of the stupidest things in creation) that out of the bitter shall come sweet, and certainly some of the bitterest trials the world has witnessed have resulted in the sweetest fruits.

So *Madame Rosette* left, full of jaundice, to be nursed at her mistress's expense at a hospital, and Agnes reigned in her stead, and after a few days' closer intercourse with this friend of her childhood Lady Muriel did a very foolish thing. She confided in her, and related the whole of her trouble about Athol Fergusson.

If there ever was an excuse for a woman placing confidence in her lady's maid, perhaps it was here. Muriel and Agnes had been little children together in Revranches and associated as equals.

Even when nearly grown up there had been a certain amount of familiarity between them, and though when Agnes became her maid Lady Muriel had tried to keep up the necessary reserve between a mistress and a servant, there had been moments when they were alone, and talked of the past together, when it had all broken down. Agnes had seemed, as Muriel once observed, like a little

bit of Revranches and her childhood mixed together, and necessarily also, like a little bit of her happy courting days with Athol Fergusson. They had not been *confidantes* in the old times, for they had not amalgamated in disposition. Muriel was frank and ingenuous, and Agnes cunning and sly; besides there had been that little undefined jealousy of the handsome young Englishman between them to prevent an unrestrained intercourse. But now everything was altered; they no longer stood on the same ground. If Lady Muriel spoke it was condescending on her part—all Agnes had to do was to listen and acquiesce. But she knew well how to draw the innocent Muriel out. It was her object to make her betray herself as much as possible. And so, betwixt the trouble and the loneliness of the mistress and the duplicity of the maid, the history of Muriel's heart was laid bare. How many women might trace the whole of their lives' misfortune to the same cause? The

folly of intrusting one's opinions or intentions—perhaps one's very reputation—to the mercy of a dependant, is incalculable, and yet it is a folly committed every day. Women are so soft, and so fond of talking, they yearn so for sympathy and an assurance of relief, and their servants are about them in their most solitary and unguarded hours. If no man is a hero to his *valet de chambre*, surely no woman is a heroine to her lady's maid. It is comparatively easy to keep on the mask in public, to drive care in the background whilst we talk, or dance, or sing, but when we come back and sit down in our own rooms alone, life and the world will not be baulked of their prey. Then all the past, with its bitter memories and its missed sweetnesses, rushes back upon our minds, and just because we *have* seemed so merry and happy the reaction sets in, the flood sluices are unlocked, and nature will have her way. And that is the time when a woman's sympathizing glance

—real or feigned—and tender touch and softly-spoken words of consolation leave us helpless in her hands. After all, we think, she is a *woman*, prone to suffer, and to struggle, and to love, like ourselves, and we forget the difference in her station, and only remember that she feels for us. But we forget also that it is a sympathy that cannot endure, that the next day or the next hour may see a cause spring up to part us, and that between the lower classes and the upper there dwells a firm and settled antagonism, which invariably displays itself on the first occasion for dissension. It may seem a harsh assertion, but it is a true one, that familiarity invariably spoils the relationship between a servant and her employer. Dependants cannot stand raising. To admit them to your confidence is to place them on a level with yourself, and they are not fitted for the position. They lose their heads. They treat you as they would their equals, you resent.

the impertinence, and they resent being deposed again. It may be averred with certainty, that there has never been an instance of such a friendship lasting, unless the mistress has descended to the level of the servant. But few sink so low as that. They play with their domestics so long as it is convenient to themselves, and find, when they are tired of their own *complaisance*, that they have turned a humble friend into a dangerous enemy. If all the false oaths sworn to by servants in the High Courts of Justice could be brought to light, ladies would think twice before they pulled off their society mask before these traitors to the domestic hearth.

But Muriel knew nothing of all this, and had long forgotten any little distaste she might have experienced for Agnes Prudhomme in the olden days.

Had there been any such feeling between them, surely the servant had forgotten it also.

Agnes's voice was so low and sympathetic when she saw that Lady Muriel was fatigued and out of spirits, her touch was so gentle as it rested on her; once or twice she had even ventured to bend down and kiss the hand which lay within her reach. Could she fetch nothing for her lady? she would ask. Was there no one she wished to see? It distressed her beyond measure to note her dear *Made-moiselle* Muriel's depression. Ah! *miladi* would pardon her for using the dear old name, but she could not quite forget those happy days, and she would give all she possessed, even her very life, to see her smile and hear her chat again as she used to do when they were all together in Revranches. And so it happened that one night when Muriel was unusually miserable, and Agnes was more tender than before, that Colonel de Crespigny's wife threw her arms about the neck of her childhood's friend, and weeping, told her everything. Agnes wept, too—cro-

codile tears, which she could pump up at will — as she listened to the melancholy recital.

“Ah, *mademoiselle*,” she cried, kneeling on the hearthrug at Muriel’s feet and clasping her about the waist, “and is it possible that you love him still like this? Oh, how *désolée*, how grieved I am for you. When I heard you were married I said to myself, ‘But it is impossible. It is a thing unheard of. What then has become of *ce cher Monsieur* Fergusson, *un garçon si brave*? Why, *mademoiselle* loves him better than her life.’ But I came, and saw it for myself. I was sorry, but I was dumb. It was none of my business—I, a poor servant. What right had *I* to grieve? But I felt you could not be untrue, and I am right. You love him still as much as ever. Ah, *mademoiselle*, the news will make him very, *very* happy.”

“But, Agnes, that is what distresses me so. If I thought that Athol loved me still and

thought of me, ever so little, I could bear it, but he will not even see me, or answer my letters. He thinks me a wicked and faithless girl, and so I am. I ought to have had trust in him, and patience to wait for him. But he does not know how I was tried. First, he never answered my letters. I wrote to him several times from Paris, but I don't even know if he received them.' And then papa told me he had sailed for India, and wouldn't be home for ten years, and that if I didn't marry the colonel he would send me back to Revranches to live with the Grants till Athol returned. And fancy what that would have been, Agnes. To return to Revranches after I had been introduced into society, and to wait there without Athol till I was an old maid. It was a cruel thing of papa to say. It drove me nearly crazy, and so I decided to marry Colonel de Crespigny instead, and you see what has come of it. *I am miserable.*"

“My poor dear lady,” said Agnes, “I have seen it for a long time past, ever since that Madame Lorrimer came into the house. How *could* you be happy with so gross a deception practised on you? But cheer up. Do not be so downhearted. When Sir Athol comes to hear all this, he will see how you were pressed, and he will forgive everything and be your good friend as he was before.”

“Oh, Agnes!” cried her mistress, “that is what I am longing for. To see him, if only for a few minutes—to tell him all that I have told to you—to beg him to forgive me, so that I may have a little peace. If I don’t have peace,” continued Muriel excitedly, with her hands to her head, “I shall go mad.”

“*Soyez tranquille,*” replied Agnes soothingly, “that will come soon enough. Where is the difficulty?”

“The difficulty is in Sir Athol himself. He *won’t* see me. I have sent him a mes-

sage—and a letter. I have even met and addressed him, but he refuses to write, or speak to me. He even pretended not to recognize me.”

“*Pauvre monsieur !*” laughed Agnes softly. “He loves you so distractedly he dares not trust himself in your presence, for fear of betraying himself. That is evident enough.”

“Much more likely he despises me for a fickle and false-hearted girl,” said Muriel bitterly.

“*Pardon, miladi !* but you know little of men if you think that. If *monsieur* were indifferent, why should he refuse to meet you ? Would he not come, if only to vent his displeasure, and upbraid you for your perfidy ? Men are not so patient as all that. They can revile and abuse the same as women. *Miladi* needs no one to remind her of that truth. But he is afraid. He trembles at the idea. He knows that were he to trust himself in your presence all the

old love would burst forth again, and in half a minute he would be at your feet."

Muriel's eyes grew soft and humid at the idea.

"Do you *really* think so, Agnes? My poor Athol! Ah, God! if one could only read the future, and know the strength of one's own heart. All my life I shall mourn the loss of my first love. But if I could only see him for half-an-hour—see him in private and alone, so that I might say all that is in my heart, my mind would be at rest, and I would try and do my duty for the remainder of my life."

"*Miladi* does not ask much. It should be easy," remarked Agnes.

"But *how*, dear Agnes," said Muriel despairingly, "when Athol refuses to see me?"

"Perhaps *monsieur* would not refuse to see *me, miladi*. We used to be good friends in Revranches. Can *I* not tell him how you mourn the estrangement between you?"

But Muriel shrank from the idea of using her servant as a go-between.

“No, no, Agnes! it is best not. Were it discovered, you would only get into a scrape, and perhaps the colonel would insist on your dismissal.”

“I do not care *that* for the colonel,” cried Agnes, snapping her fingers, “and I would run a much greater risk to serve *miladi*.”

“I am *sure* you would,” said Muriel gratefully, “and I don’t know what I should do without your sympathy, Agnes. And if—if—there seems no other way, perhaps I may ask you to do me the kindness you propose. Surely (as you say), my darling cannot have forgotten all about me so soon.”

“Sir Athol has forgotten *nothing*, I will answer for that,” replied Agnes demurely; “but *miladi* does not know where he lives perhaps?”

“Oh, yes! I do. Mr. Holmes told me the address of his chambers, 313, Piccadilly,

and his country seat is at Richmond, near the Court. It is called Bromieshall.”

“*Bromieshall*,” echoed Agnes, who had accompanied her mistress more than once to Oakley Court, “why, the grounds almost touch. I *should* know, for the last time I went with *miladi* to *Milor* Rhyllton’s there was a footman at Bromieshall who was very attentive to me, and I used to walk with him sometimes of an evening. Does *miladi* know the *bosquet* that runs round the back of the park? If you follow it to the end, it will lead you almost opposite the Bromieshall dairy.”

“I *do* know it,” replied Muriel; “I used to walk round there in the morning sometimes before Lady Rhyllton had come down to breakfast.”

“*Miladi* would have grand opportunities at Oakley Court—much better than in London, where one cannot stir without being observed,” said Agnes thoughtfully.

“Yes, if Sir Athol happened to be there,” returned her mistress; “but how do we know that he ever goes to Bromieshall? He may not like the place.”

“Is it probable, *miladi*, that he never visits his mother and his sister—he who was known to be so devoted a son in Rev-ranches? He goes down there often enough, you may be assured.”

“But I have no means of ascertaining *when* he does so,” replied Muriel with a sigh.

“Will you leave it to me, *miladi*? Will you intrust me to find out Sir Athol’s movements and report them to you? To *know* them can do no one any harm, and you can make what use of the information you choose.”

“But how will you do it, Agnes?” asked Muriel curiously.

“Never mind, *miladi*,” replied the girl, laughing. “When it is accomplished you shall learn the secret.”

And in effect, a week after she came and whispered in Lady Muriel's ear, that Sir Athol Fergusson had arranged to spend from the following Saturday to Monday at Bromieshall.

“And now, *miladi*, it rests with yourself. Go down to the Court for the same time and I'll engage you shall see Sir Athol and speak to him.”

“But who told you, Agnes? How did you find this out?”

“Bah! madame; it was easy enough. You gave me Sir Athol's address, and Sir Athol has a man. And where there is a man, nothing is difficult to a woman. I had to make the acquaintance of that man. I chose the evening hour, when his master would be out. I had not waited fifteen minutes before the man appeared also to go out—and the rest was child's play.”

“And you are *sure* the information is correct?”

“As sure as I can be of anything in this world. Why should the man deceive me? He is going too, and he made a little appointment with me down there. *Voilà !* how things fit into one another. I can keep the man quiet, while *miladi* is engaged with the master.”

“Oh, Agnes, it sounds very wrong, but I feel I *must* see him or my heart will break. At all events, we will go down to the Court on Saturday. I am feeling really ill with all this suspense and trouble, and a little change will do me good.”

Colonel de Crespigny grumbled somewhat on hearing that his wife intended spending from Saturday to Monday at Richmond, but he had no good excuse to prevent her visiting her father's house. As for himself, he did not propose to accompany her. He felt that he had been in *mauvais odeur* with the earl, ever since the little affair about Mrs. Lorrimer (for however wild a man may have

been himself, he is quick to resent an affront offered to one of his female relations). The colonel therefore decided to remain at home, though he thought it hard that Agnes should accompany her mistress.

“*You* going too, *ma belle*,” he exclaimed, pinching the lady’s maid’s cheek. “Am I to be quite deserted then, and left to do nothing but think over my sins for the whole of Sunday?”

“It would take you a month of Sundays to do that properly,” rejoined the girl pertly. “Why, of course I am going. Who else is there to look after her ladyship, now *Madame Rosette* is ill?”

“I hope you *will* look after her, then,” said the colonel moodily, “for I don’t like her way of going on of late. There’s more than meets the eye in it. I’m sure of that.”

Agnes walked up close to him, with her finger laid across her nose.

“Trust *me*,” she whispered significantly;

“I am going down quite as much on *your* business as hers, and nothing will happen without my knowledge. I have my own suspicions, *voyez! monsieur?* But I am silent till I am sure. And when I *am* sure, I will be silent no longer. Are you satisfied?”

And she left him, cursing and swearing at every woman in the world, for being double-faced, and treacherous, and false.

It was a glorious summer's day in July, one of the last days of the season, when Lady Muriel went down to Oakley Court. Richmond was in the height of its beauty. The broad, majestic river was covered with boats containing parties of pleasure. The noble park was clothed in verdure overhead, and carpeted with green—the country lanes lined with flowering hedges, redolent of perfume, and alive with the song of lark and nightingale. There was no excuse needed for Muriel wishing to pass a few hours of such heavenly weather in her father's house.

Cecil Seton was extravagant in her delight at seeing her again, and Lord Rhyllton seemed proud to receive his beautiful daughter. Only her step-mother held aloof with chilling courtesy, and made her feel that she was not entirely welcome. The Countess of Rhyllton (who had never really liked her step-daughter and been jealous of her from the beginning), had evinced a decided hostility towards her, ever since the time that she had rushed to her father's protection, against the insults of her husband. She saw that Lady Muriel was of a very warm and impetuous disposition, and she had no idea of the Court being turned into a refuge, each time she had a difference with Colonel de Crespigny. She had expressed her opinion on the subject very strongly on that occasion, and had treated Lady Muriel coolly ever since. But Muriel cared nothing for Lady Rhyllton's rancour. She had come down to see her father (so she said), and her heart and mind

were filled with the thought of that other interview, which she dreaded and longed for, at one and the same time. Cecil Seton observed the difference in her sister's manner at once, and pestered her for the reason of the change. She wanted Lady Muriel to ride with her, or drive with her, or come for a long walk in the park, where they could exchange confidences without fear of interruption. But Muriel wanted none of these things. She preferred to sit on the lawn, or to rest in her own room—to do anything, in fact, rather than go out of range of the message which might reach her at any moment. Cecil declared the London season had done her no good, that she looked pale and dispirited and dull, and Muriel refuted the assertion, and pronounced herself to be quite well and in the best of spirits, only a little tired, and disinclined for exertion.

She said this as they were strolling in the garden (now a mass of bloom) together, and

yet Cecil could not but observe how *distracted* she was, and how her head kept turning every moment towards the shrubbery, where Agnes had disappeared in search of the *valet*, who was to give her the necessary information regarding the movements of Sir Athol Fergusson. At last she came back again, but there was no look of triumph in her face. Muriel's heart sunk. Was it possible she had been mistaken, and Athol had not come down to Richmond after all? To satisfy her anxiety, and without the least regard for appearances, she left her sister's side and flew to that of her maid.

“Oh, Agnes, what is the matter? Hasn't he come?”

Agnes regarded her in astonishment. She had always known the English had no *finesse*, but such rashness as this was inexplicable to her. To imitate it, might upset all her own plans.

“*Attendez, miladi,*” she answered in a low

voice of reproof, "I cannot speak here. You must wait until I dress you for dinner."

Lady Muriel walked back to Cecil's side like a scolded child. Poor girl! She had yet to learn that she had placed herself under the most dominating of all controls—that which a servant holds over the mistress, of whose secrets she is the possessor.

"I don't like that maid of yours, Muriel," remarked Cecil as her sister rejoined her; "she is so pert in her speech and manner. Where is *Rosette*?"

"Poor *Rosette* is ill in hospital with the jaundice," replied Muriel, "and so Agnes is my only attendant for the present. But you are mistaken, Cissy. She does not intend to be pert. She knows me so well, you know. We were brought up together at Revranches."

"It seems to me that she knows you *too* well," said Cecil curtly.

But that did not prevent Lady Muriel from flying up to her bedroom, as soon as

ever she could find a reasonable excuse for doing so, and summoning her *confidante* to her presence.

“Oh, Agnes, I am dying of impatience. Did you see your friend, and what did he say?”

“It is all right, *miladi*. Sir Athol is expected down this evening by the eight o’clock train. But *miladi* must not be so rash. You will spoil everything. You will make your people to suspect, and then they will watch as well as myself. It is the extreme of folly. Please—if this thing is to be done—to leave it to me to do in my own way.”

“I am very sorry, Agnes,” replied Muriel humbly, “and I know it was foolish; but I am so anxious. And now, what do you think? Shall I see him to-night?”

“*Mais, certainement non,*” exclaimed Agnes emphatically; “you must wait and be patient, and act as if there was nothing on your mind—and then, when the moment has

arrived, I will say to you, '*Now!*' and then if you would meet him, you must go."

"I understand, and I will try and be patient," said Muriel with a sigh, as she commenced to dress for dinner.

She acted her part pretty well through the evening, but she was too excited to sleep, and rose on Sunday morning with a heart that palpitated almost to bursting, each time she remembered that before the day closed, she might have seen and spoken with Athol Fergusson again. She refused to go to church, or leave the house all day, and Agnes was quite angry with her for having done so, without consulting her.

"You English spoil everything by *over-doing* it," she remarked somewhat rudely; "*miladi* must please to say she will attend evening church, or I may be able to do nothing to help her."

"But, Agnes, if I go to church, how can I see Sir Athol?"

“You will agree to go, *miladi*, and *I* will contrive the rest.”

Lady Rhyllton, having been not *too* particular in her early days, made up for it by being extra particular now, and all her household were expected to attend church three times on Sunday. Consequently, when Lady Muriel proposed to accompany the family to evening service, it was only considered the right thing for her to do. Agnes left it to the very last. She even dressed her mistress down to her gloves, and when the carriage waited at the door, and the earl and countess and Miss Seton were seated inside, she ran downstairs to say that Lady Muriel was faint, and she could not allow her to go with them. Cecil was naturally anxious to stay at home with her sister, but Agnes begged she would not do so. “Her ladyship wants nothing but quiet,” she said, “and company will only make her worse. The colonel has always cautioned me to

obey his orders in this respect, and insist upon her being left alone with me."

In the face of such a request, there was nothing to do but to comply with Colonel de Crespigny's wishes, and the carriage drove off to church with the rest of the family. It had scarcely turned out of the drive before Agnes was again at Lady Muriel's side.

"Now, *ma chère*," she exclaimed familiarly (for, alas! she had grown very familiar of late with her young mistress), "dress yourself as you think fit, and go down into the garden and wait for me under the cedar tree. I am going down to the *bosquet* at once. Sir Athol's family have also gone to church, and I have reason to believe that he stays at home by himself. This is an opportunity, if we are to have one. Courage! I will be back with good news for you in a very short time." She hurried away as she spoke, and Muriel having changed her church-going costume for something simpler,

descended to the lawn, and sat down under the shade of the dark cedar-tree, to await Agnes's return. She was not absent more than ten minutes, and when she came back she was breathless with the haste she had made.

“Bravo!” she exclaimed, “nothing could have happened more fortunately. The mother and sister are gone, and *he* is walking about the grounds all by himself. Come, *miladi*, at once, and catch him before he enters the house again.”

But Muriel's limbs could hardly support her. Now that the moment had arrived for the completion of her wishes, her strength seemed to have failed. Agnes Prudhomme had almost to shake her before she could induce her to move.

“Come, *miladi*, this is nonsense. Is all my trouble to be in vain? Then, never will I again risk my situation in order to do you a kindness.”

“Oh, no, Agnes. Of course I will go. I am longing to go. But when I think of seeing him again my courage fails me. Oh, my heart. Why did I ever love him so dearly?”

“So that you might experience the great joy of meeting,” replied the maid philosophically, as she pulled her mistress into the shrubbery. “Now, *miladi*, we will not linger. I will go with you as far as the turning (for I have promised my *valet* to take a little walk with him), and once there you can do the rest for yourself.”

She half pulled, half led her mistress down to the place of *rendezvous* as she spoke, and Lady Muriel (with all her heart in her eyes) followed her expectantly. The shrubbery ran round the piece of wooded pasture they dignified by the name of the park, and at the end of it was a black wooden gate adjoining on the public road. Opposite to this gate was a dairy belonging to Bromieshall,

with a cottage occupied by the cowherd, and a small wicket which led into the back of the grounds. It was through this wicket that Agnes proposed that Muriel should seek her lover. But the girl drew back in consternation. She could never (she averred) be bold enough to walk right in without leave, and on such an errand.

“*Mais, pourquoi non?*” demanded Agnes with a shrug of the shoulders. “*He* is in there, without doubt. M. Herschel has just left him. Why do you not go to make a call upon his mother? You are not supposed to know she is at church.”

“But Mrs. Fergusson was never quite friendly to me, Agnes—and now——”

“Ah, well, *miladi*, I have done my utmost. It is for you to complete the work for yourself. But I had better not stay here with you. It is not *convenable*, and M. Herschel is waiting for me up higher. *Adieu, miladi! A la bonne fortune.*”

She ran away, laughing as she spoke, and Lady Muriel was left standing by herself in the lane. She looked wistfully at the little gate, a hundred times, but she had not the courage to enter it. Suppose that Athol should refuse to speak to her in his own grounds before his own servants, just as he had done in the jeweller's shop. What an awful indignity that would be for her. And yet—and yet—she *must* see him, and make him acknowledge her identity. It might be the last chance she would ever have. As she stood there, trembling and undecided, she heard his voice on the other side of the high palings that enclosed Bromieshall, and like a hare to her form, she darted inside the wooden gate of Oakley Court. Athol Fergusson had always been noted for the possession of a peculiarly sweet and musical voice; and Muriel could not mistake it. As she listened to it on the present occasion, she thought it sounded very sad and subdued,

although he was only talking with the dairyman about cows and their ailments, and though his words could not reach her ear, his voice went through her very heart. All the dreams which she had been dreaming about him came back upon her with full force, and she felt as if her lover had been torn from her, and she had not given him up of her own free will. She had just screwed up her courage to the pitch of confronting him, and had advanced a little for that purpose, when he walked straight out into the lane, and stood before her. The involuntary cry of "*Athol*" escaped her lips at once. As he heard it and became aware of her presence, he turned round sharply as though to re-enter his own grounds. But Muriel could not stand that. She flew after him, and grasped him by the arm.

"*Athol!*" she exclaimed again, "for God's sake speak to me. What have I done that you should not even speak? You are kill-

ing me by inches. I am dying of this grief."

Then he *did* turn, and regard her with those beautiful, serious eyes, that had begun to haunt her in her dreams. She gazed up in his face, wildly and tearfully, but excited as she was, though it was Athol's face, she saw that it was marvellously changed. The wave of suffering which he had passed through had sharpened his features, and planted a look of intensity on them which had not been there before. And he appeared to be far more of a man. The beautiful boyish look of simplicity and freshness had gone for ever, and left a gaze more noble, more steadfast and more purified, perhaps, but not so youthful or ingenuous.

"What is it that you want of me?" he asked in a stifled voice. "Is it to renew a question that is buried? If so, I must refuse to disinter it."

His words sounded cold and prudent, but in

reality his whole frame was so agitated by the sight of her that he could hardly speak.

"I want to explain to you," she commenced hurriedly, "how it was that I became engaged to Colonel de Crespigny."

"Lady Muriel," he interrupted her quickly, "I must decline to hear anything on that point. In the first place, it is of no interest to me. You are a married woman, and no one but your husband has any right to the explanation you allude to. It concerns no one but himself, and I must beg you to spare me the recital."

"Then you have no feeling left for me," she answered weeping, "you have ceased to regret the days when we cared for one another in Revranches. Perhaps you do not even remember them."

The blood suffused his face when she mentioned Revranches, until his very eyes glowed under it, but he would not give way to his feelings.

“I remember only *one* thing,” he answered gravely, “that you are the wife of Colonel de Crespigny, and I have no part nor lot in you. And if it were otherwise, it could avail neither you nor me.”

“But, Athol, my dearest, *I love you still*,” she cried in her despair, as she hid her glowing face in her hands. He did not speak. The deepest silence reigned around. Had she again offended him, or was he waiting till he could find words in which to answer her? She raised her eyes. *He was gone!* Had he sunk through the earth at her feet he could not have disappeared more unexpectedly. Lady Muriel’s first feeling was one of blank amazement, the next of indignation at the way in which he had treated her. She waited for some minutes to see if he would return, but when she found he had indeed gone, she ran back into the shrubbery, with a heart beating with disappointment and wounded pride.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE LION'S DEN.

AGNES PRUDHOMME did not return from her appointment with M. Herschel the *valet* until it was time to undress her mistress for the night, and then she appeared rosy, laughing and excited, and quite surprised to find that Lady Muriel was not in the enjoyment of the same high spirits as herself. A few minutes, however, sufficed to put her in possession of the unfortunate issue of her manœuvres on her lady's behalf, at which she seemed almost as concerned as Muriel.

“ *Quel dommage !* ” she cried, shrugging her shoulders. “ Ah ! *ma chère*, you English do not know how to manage these things. A Frenchwoman would not have let him escape. And a man too, to refuse to listen to a tale of

love! Bah! he does not deserve that you should break your heart over him. He is what you call a pig—no, a prig, and is too cold and proper for anything.”

“But, Agnes, he never used to be cold in Revranches,” remonstrated Muriel. “He used to take me in his arms and kiss me until I had no breath left. I have often scolded him for being so fierce. I used to call him a tiger. And to think that now,” she added mournfully, “he will not even *look* at me.”

“*Miladi* has reason,” said Agnes. “Now I come to think of it, Sir Athol *cannot* be a prig. His eyes are all flame, and he has a generous colour in his face that goes with a warm and ardent temperament. And there is no doubt he loved *miladi*. *Parbleu!* I should know that. Then, there must be some other reason. Perhaps he has fallen in love with another woman?”

“No, no,” exclaimed Muriel emphatically.

“Oh! Agnes, do not say *that*. You destroy my last hope.”

Agnes shrugged her shoulders again. “It was but a suggestion, *ma chère*. But it is not an impossibility. You leave the man for twelve months to himself. Do you believe in the fidelity of a man lasting for twelve months? You are very simple. And if there is not some one else, how can you account for a young man of four-and-twenty—warm, impressionable and free—not making love to a beautiful woman who is ready to fling herself into his arms?”

“But I am *not* ready,” replied Lady Muriel indignantly, “I have no intentions of the sort. I only want him for my friend.”

“*C'est ça*,” said Agnes, with a mocking smile. “You all want them for *friends*, until they propose to be lovers. But, *miladi*, it is one of two things. Either Sir Athol loves you, or he loves you not. If *not*, let him go. It is of no use to try and rekindle the ashes

of a dead fire. But if he *does* (as I believe he does) love you still, too ardently to trust himself in your presence, then—then——”

“*What, Agnes?*” asked Muriel breathlessly.

“You shall have what you wish for,” returned the maid oracularly, as she left her mistress to her night’s repose.

But Muriel could not sleep. For the first time in her life she was (what is commonly termed) *in love*. Opposition had caused the flame of passion which had hitherto slept in her breast, to spring up into a glowing fire, that threatened to consume her peace. She was passing through that stage of feeling which a man experiences when he has conceived an attachment which he has no certainty of being returned. She tossed for hours on her bed, thinking of every trifling detail of her acquaintance with Athol Fergusson, wondering what reason he could possibly have for so pertinaciously avoiding her, and picturing to herself future meetings,

when the misunderstanding between them should have passed away. And when at last she slept, it was to dream of the happy days that were gone for ever, to feel his kisses on her lips, his arm about her waist, and to wake with a cry to remember that they were estranged.

Agnes Prudhomme did not lie awake so long as her mistress, but she too had her moments of thought and speculation. Was it possible, she pondered, that what she had suggested was the truth, and some rival had come between Lady Muriel and her former lover? It was difficult to account for his behaviour on any other grounds. Virtue (amongst young men) was an unknown quality to Agnes, and did not enter into her argument at all. The most reasonable explanation she could arrive at, was that Sir Athol was so unhappy on the subject of Lady Muriel's marriage, that despair at the sight of her caused him to be abrupt and uncommuni-

cative. But, whatever the reason might be, Agnes determined that she would find it out for herself on the very first opportunity, as she had no idea of wasting her time in forwarding an intrigue that would result in nothing. And having arrived at this satisfactory conclusion, she rolled herself up in the bedclothes, and went fast asleep.

The last idea that had struck her was the right one. Athol was indeed so miserable for the loss of Muriel—so full of love for her—and so afraid of compromising himself by speech, that he had not the courage even to listen to her voice. Her appearance to him was as the glimpse of Paradise to the Peri shut outside the gate—the Paradise which he had once believed to be wholly and solely his own. And added to this, he had lost faith in anything she said. Why should he believe her now, when she declared that she loved him? Had she not sworn the same thing,

over and over again, upon the Ramparts of Revranches? Had not Laura Vivian echoed the cry in Malta? Women always said so! They said it to any man, whether they loved him or not. It was only the outcome of their insatiable thirst for admiration. When Muriel had him all to herself—her abject slave and adorer, with no hope or wish (as God was his witness) except as it related to his love for her, she threw him over, without warning, for the sake of making a wealthy marriage. What could be more despicable? And now that she had lost him—that he had, as he ardently hoped, in some measure combated with and overcome the fierce pain that threatened at one time to upset his reason—she was trying to whistle him back again, to steal his honour and his manhood, and make of him the lowest thing that crawls—a married woman's plaything. This was Sir Athol's view of the matter—the view of a very young man who had not seen much of life,

but who was nevertheless thoroughly earnest, conscientious, and true. The brief interview he had held with his lost love was sufficient to spoil more than his night's rest, and he returned to town the following day with an air of the deepest depression. His mother and sister were anxious to persuade him to pass a few days at Bromieshall; they didn't think that London agreed with him, he looked so serious and so pale; but he believed Lady Muriel Crespigny to be making a stay at Oakley Court, and so no entreaties could persuade him to remain, and by luncheon-time he was in his own rooms again.

M. Herschel, who had naturally heard all the scandal from Agnes Prudhomme, feared that his master must have been hit very badly, as he saw him lying back in an arm-chair all the afternoon, with an open book in his hand and his eyes fixed upon the ceiling. He was half afraid to suggest to him that it was long past the usual hour that he took

his dinner at his club, and that he himself (M. Herschel) began to feel the want of his ordinary meal.

“Don't wait for me,” replied Sir Athol, “I'm not well. I don't know that I shall dine to-day. I shall probably go out and get something later on. You can leave as usual, Herschel, I shall not require your services again to-night.”

“But, Sare Athol——” expostulated the *valet*.

“Do as I bid you,” said his master, “I prefer to be left alone.”

He rose, after the man's departure, and walked into the outer room, and sat down in the dusk at the piano and played through a few plaintive melodies to himself. But they had no power to soothe him, and after a while Athol returned to his old seat, and again delivered himself over to thought. He hardly knew afterwards for how long he had been day-dreaming, when he heard a tap

upon the door of the outer apartment. His first feeling was one of annoyance that Herschel was not there to answer it. It could only be the laundress, or the bed-maker, or some other of the various harpies that collect around an unmarried man in chambers. He would pretend that he was out. But the knocking having sounded several times more without an answer, the handle of the door was turned and a footstep entered the room. Sir Athol was about to resent the intrusion, when the velvet *portière* that screened him was gently pulled aside, and a woman stood before him. For a moment he believed her to be Lady Muriel, and stumbled to his feet, but when he had hurriedly lit the gas, the light fell on the face of Agnes Prudhomme.

“*Agnes Prudhomme!*” he exclaimed, staggering backward in his surprise; “where in the name of Heaven have you sprung from?” (For he had heard nothing of her having

entered the service of Lady Muriel de Crespigny.)

“ You are very much astonished to see me, *monsieur* ? ” she said laughing, as she came forward and offered him her hand ; “ but I hope you will not take my visit as an impertinence. I hear that you are a great gentleman now—a baronet—*Sir Athol* !—but that will not prevent your remembering your old friends at Revranches—eh ? ”

“ No, no, of course not,” he answered, though uneasily, for Agnes reminded him too painfully of the past ; “ and where are you living now, Agnes ? When did you come to England ? ”

“ Ah ! a long time since, *monsieur*. When my friends began to leave Revranches, I, too, tired of the place. But I am only in service still, though a great deal better off than when I worked for those beggarly Grants. I am maid to a titled lady, who pays me well, and I am content. *Voilà !* ”

“I am glad to hear it, Agnes,” said Athol languidly, “I always thought your talents were wasted in Revranches.”

“And how is *monsieur*?” inquired Agnes, seating herself. “Is he also well and happy? I cannot quite think so. He looks very pale to me, and his voice is too serious and too sad.”

“I am well enough,” replied Sir Athol, “but I suppose you have heard I have had other changes, besides that of becoming a wealthy man. Lady Muriel has deserted me, Agnes. She has married another.”

“I have heard it, *monsieur*, and I know the reason. She was forced into it against her will.”

“That is impossible. There is no such thing as compulsion in such matters now-a-days. Lady Muriel forgot the promise she had made to a pauper, as soon as a better match was proposed to her.”

“You are *quite* mistaken,” cried Agnes

emphatically. "You are wrong, *monsieur*. Some one has lied to you."

"The person who lied was herself. Lady Muriel told me with her own lips that she was engaged to Colonel de Crespigny, and that all promises between us must be broken off."

"With her father, *Milor* Rhyllton, standing beside her, *monsieur*. You do not know how he coerced and threatened poor *Mademoiselle* Muriel, until she had consented to have no more to do with you."

"No threats or coercion, nor death itself, should have made me false to *her*," said Athol between his teeth.

"Perhaps not. You are a man—courageous and daring. You fear nothing and no one. You do not know what it feels like to be a timid girl, who believes all that is said to her and is afraid of her own shadow."

"You used not to be such a friend of Lady Muriel's in the old days, Agnes. Why

should you stick up for her now?" asked Athol suspiciously.

"Perhaps because I know her better, or am ashamed of my jealousy. For I was *very* jealous of her then, Sir Athol, and you know it."

The young man blushed. The heavenly art of blushing had not quite deserted him, and he *did* know, well enough, that Agnes Prudhomme had once professed to love himself.

"Have you had an opportunity, then, of knowing her better since you came to England?" he said presently.

"I have, *monsieur*, and I know that her heart has been nearly broken by her marriage. I believe that it will break entirely and kill her if she cannot find a distraction from her grief. Her husband is a brute—*voilà — un homme vilain*. He curses and swears at her—he calls her vile names—he has even brought his mistress into the house to insult her! What would you have?

She flies to her father, *pauvre chérie*, to seek counsel and protection, and *Milor Rhyllton* flings her back into the colonel's arms. And amidst all this insult and perfidy she is ever crying for *you*—for you only, *monsieur*—for her *Athol* to come, and save her heart from breaking.”

“Agnes! How do you know all this?” exclaimed *Athol* excitedly, as he rose and approached her.

“Because I live with her, *monsieur*—because she is the lady whom I serve, and I see her day and night, and am the *confidante* of her troubles.”

“And I cannot help her! My poor lost darling. God pity me! I cannot help her,” cried the young man, as he flung himself down upon a couch and buried his face in his hands. Agnes let him give way to his grief for a few minutes—it was telling her all she wished to know, and then she asked very quietly:

“But why not, *monsieur*? Your society is all my dear mistress asks for. Why should you not help her?”

“Because, Agnes,” said Sir Athol, raising himself, “I cannot do it with honour. I cannot trust myself. I love her so dearly still, that the sound of her voice leaves me as helpless as a child. Between her and me it must be *all or none*. I have seen her once or twice lately, and the sight has completely unmanned me. Has she told you,” he added wistfully, “that we met at Bromies-hall last evening?”

“Yes, *mon ami*, she tells me *everything*. It is in consequence of that meeting that I am here. Your coldness nearly killed her. She was like a mad creature all night, and is not much calmer now. Ah! *monsieur*! cannot you give her a little of the love of other days, to make her better able to bear her heavy load?”

“How is that possible?” he demanded

rather haughtily. "Do you forget that Muriel is a married woman? I could only lighten one load by substituting another, and a heavier one—a load of remorse—and that I will never do."

"You Englishmen are very cold," remarked Agnes deprecatingly.

"Are we?" rejoined Athol, flushing up. "Sometimes I wish that we were colder. But whatever I may feel, I would die before I did anything to compromise the name of Lady Muriel de Crespigny. I hold it far too dear."

"Then it is of no use my staying here any longer," said Agnes, as she rose from her seat. "I came because I saw her misery, and thought you might try to relieve it. But if you are implacable—if you are so afraid of compromising yourself—why, the best advice I can offer her is to forget you as quickly as possible. And she will *do it, monsieur*, for nothing kills a woman's love like contempt."

“*Compromise myself!*” repeated Athol disdainfully ; “ what do I care for *myself*? Who would blame *me* for being known as Lady Muriel de Crespigny’s lover? In the present state of society it would be a feather in my cap, rather than otherwise. It is of *her* only that I am thinking. I cannot visit openly at her husband’s house, and I would not do it if I could, and she shall not risk her reputation by holding private interviews with me. God is my witness, Agnes,” he continued passionately, “ that the resolution arises from no coldness or prudery on my part. I would give my life to hold her to my heart and call her mine (if only for one hour), but she shall never incur blame for my sake.”

“ You are *right, monsieur,*” exclaimed Agnes, affecting admiration for his principles, “ and I will never call you ‘ cold ’ again. You have a noble heart, and Heaven will reward it. I will try and imitate you.

I will return home and persuade *miladi* to go abroad or into the country for awhile, and try and conquer the fatal passion which is consuming her. And so I will wish you *adieu*."

"Oh, stay, Agnes; stay for one moment," cried Athol. "Tell me how my darling looks—what she says—how she amuses herself. *That*, at least, can do *her* no harm."

"But it will only make *monsieur* sad, and it is best I should not speak. It is enough that her heart is broken, and sometimes I do not think she will be very long in this world."

Sir Athol flung his head down suddenly upon his outstretched arms and burst into tears, whilst Agnes stood over him patting his shoulder.

"Oh, this is folly! This is childish of me," he exclaimed abruptly, as he dashed his tears shamefacedly away. "You have unmanned me, Agnes, with your news. Leave me now,

I beg of you; leave me to myself. It humbles me that you should see me thus."

"*Adieu*, then, *monsieur*," said Agnes mournfully, as she crept out of the room.

But as soon as she had reached the pavement she hailed a cab and drove rapidly to Queen's Gate, where she arrived just as the late dinner was being cleared away.

Colonel de Crespigny had already left the house in a violent temper (so the footman informed her), and Lady Muriel had gone up to her boudoir. Agnes ran after her mistress at once, and entered the room without ceremony. She found her reclining in an arm-chair, with her pocket-handkerchief to her eyes.

"In tears, *miladi*?" she exclaimed; "what is the matter?"

"Matter enough, Agnes," replied Muriel, with a sob, "though it is nothing new. The colonel has been calling me all sorts of names, and I am sure the servants heard

him. He was in an ill-temper because I went down to the Court yesterday (as if I couldn't visit my own father when I choose), and began to accuse me of all sorts of horrid things, and when I refused to answer him he banged out of the house in a fury, swearing in an awful manner. But I will not stand it any longer, Agnes. I am quite resolved on that. I will speak to Lord Rhyllton plainly on the matter, and have a separation."

"Oh! it hasn't come to *that* yet," said Agnes soothingly. "Never mind the colonel, *miladi*. Every one knows he is a brute. I wonder you should take the trouble to cry about him. But it is funny. I leave poor Sir Athol in tears, and then I come home and find *you* in tears. You *must* be *sympathiques*."

"*Athol*," exclaimed Muriel starting, "where have you seen Athol?"

"I have just come from him, *ma chère*. I was determined to find out the truth of his

feelings concerning you, and it is just as I said. You English do not know how to manage these things. You break your hearts for nothing. *You* weep for him and *he* weeps for you, and yet you have not the courage to come together. I find him prostrate—*désolé*. He has neither slept, nor ate, nor drank since yesterday for thinking of *miladi*."

"Oh! my poor Athol," cried Muriel, with clasped hands.

"*Miladi*, if you could see him (as I have) sobbing like a child for love of you, you could not have the heart to refuse to go and comfort him."

"But how can I go to him, Agnes?"

"What is more easy? He is alone. He has sent M. Herschel away for the night. And you are free. The colonel will not return till late."

"I should be *afraid*," said Muriel, shrinking from the idea. "I have never been out in London alone at night."

“I will go with you, *ma chère*, and with a dark cloak, and bonnet and veil, who will recognize you? And whilst you speak with *monsieur* I will stay outside and watch that no one interrupts you.”

“If I only *dared*,” sighed her mistress.

“You do not love him then?”

“Indeed, *indeed*, I do!”

“Love will dare anything. Sir Athol said just now he would dare death for *you*. And he is so *very* miserable.”

“Yes, yes, I *will* go,” said Muriel hastily, “if you will come with me, Agnes, and wait outside.”

In a few minutes she was attired in a dark walking dress, and Agnes having ascertained that the coast was clear, the two women walked out of the house together, and into the lamp-lit streets. Here Agnes hailed another cab (for Lady Muriel was so agitated she resigned herself entirely into the hands of her *confidante*) and ordered it to put them

down within a few doors of Sir Athol's chambers. Scarcely half-an-hour had elapsed since she had left them. The gas was still visible through the red silk blinds burning brightly in the sitting-rooms. To all appearance the young baronet had not quitted his dwelling-place.

“Courage, *miladi*,” she whispered as she led Muriel into the hall. “If you had witnessed his grief I should not be able to hold you back from rushing into his arms. See, that is the door to the ante-chamber. When you pass through it you will see a velvet *portière*. Sir Athol's private room is within that. I will only wait to know that he is at home, and then I will leave you.”

She turned the handle of the door as she spoke and stepped inside, and Lady Muriel tremblingly followed her. Agnes pushed her towards the curtain. It was raised, and the lovers stood face to face once more. The maid only waited to hear Lady Muriel's cry

of "Athol!" and his responsive "Muriel!" when she seized the key from the lock of the door, and, having softly closed it, locked it on the outside, and having gained the street threw the key in again at the open window, where it fell through the silken blinds with a dull thud upon the thickly carpeted floor.

And then—with a look of malicious triumph—Agnes Prudhomme made the utmost haste she could to the Sybarites' Club, where Colonel de Crespigny spent all his spare time, and sent up word that she had an important message for him.

He descended from the billiard-room at once, flushed and somewhat thick of speech, but still quite capable of understanding what was said to him.

"Well, what is it, little one?" he commenced with a leer, as he shook her by the chin.

"No nonsense," she replied sharply. "If you wish to be convinced that my surmises

are correct, you must come with me at once to Sir Athol Fergusson's chambers in Piccadilly. You remember him—*miladi's* lover at Revranches?"

"Death and thunder! What *of* him," roared the colonel.

"Only that your wife and he are locked up together in his private room. It is true, *monsieur*, as I am here. I thought her ladyship's manner was suspicious this evening, and when she left the house in disguise I followed her to 313, Piccadilly. When she entered I heard them lock the door. Come without delay and you will catch her there."

Colonel de Crespigny's fury would not permit him to make any further comment on her news, but seizing the girl's wrist he ran down the steps of his club and they proceeded to Sir Athol Fergusson's chambers together.

CHAPTER VII.

TRAPPED.

To return to Sir Athol Fergusson and Lady Muriel de Crespigny.

He was bending over the table trying to distract his thoughts by a perusal of the daily papers when she pushed aside the velvet *portière* and stood before him, and taken by surprise he pronounced her name with a fervency equal to her own. But his next words were spoken in a tone of reproach.

“Oh! why have you come here?”

“*Why have I come?*” she echoed. “Because you are in trouble, Athol. Because Agnes has told me that she left you here weeping for me—just as *I* weep for *you*.”

“I am sorry Agnes told you that,” he answered with an averted face. “I considered

her visit a confidential one, or I should have been more careful not to betray myself. But I wept for the remembrance of the past, Muriel; not for any hope of remedy in the present."

"Never mind what you wept for," she exclaimed, advancing to the centre of the room. "We are both miserable. Let us comfort one another."

But by this time Sir Athol was himself again.

"It is *impossible*, Lady Muriel," he said, "and you know it. I beg—I entreat of you not to allude to the subject again. And you must not remain here," he continued excitedly. "It was madness of you to come. What would people say if they found you in my chambers alone with me at this time of night? Who was so rash as to advise you to seek me here?"

"No one," replied Muriel boldly. "I came of my own free will, and I will not go until you have heard me speak. What do I care

what people say? Let them talk their tongues off. I see only one person in all the world, and that is—*you*.”

“Oh, Muriel! Muriel! you are cruel! You set me too hard a task,” cried the young man, as he sank down in his seat again, and buried his face in his hands.

“Athol,” she said, as she tried to pull his hands away, “you must, you *shall* listen to me. This is the fourth time I have tried to communicate with you, and I will not leave these rooms till I have done so. I will not talk of my love for you,” she went on in a trembling voice, “for perhaps you have ceased to believe in it, but I must try and acquit myself of the perfidy of which you think me guilty. I was not *quite* unfaithful to you, Athol. They deceived me. They told me you had sailed for India without sending me a word of farewell, and that you would not return for ten years, and so I thought you must have forgotten me.”

"How could I write to you when you never sent me your address?" he asked, in a hoarse voice.

"*Never sent my address!*" she repeated. "But I wrote to you constantly. I sent four or five letters from Paris, but as I never received an answer, I thought — well, I didn't know *what* to think. But your silence made me very miserable."

"I never had *one* letter from you," said Athol, incredulously.

"Not even *that* which I left with Agnes to deliver to you, the one in which I inclosed my little cornelian seal?"

"Certainly not. Agnes did not even give me a message from you. She told me of your sudden departure, but said you were too hurried to write a letter, or to think of anybody but yourself."

"She has *deceived* me," said Lady Muriel emphatically.

"Take care she doesn't deceive you fur-

ther. I never thought her trustworthy, and she has not been your friend in sending you here to-night. And now, Lady Muriel, I beg of you to return home, and never come here again. It is neither safe nor right that you should do so. You cannot regret the past more than myself, but no regrets can bring it back again, and for the future, we can be nothing to one another."

"*Nothing?*" she cried, "when I love you like my life. "Oh, Athol, you have no heart. Have you quite forgotten Revranches and the happy times we spent together there? Have you forgotten the Ramparts, where we strolled in the evenings, and talked of nothing but our mutual love, and what we should do when we were married? And to think that it is all—all—over. That I am bound to a man whom I hate, and you live here—alone. Oh, my God! it breaks my heart to know it." With this, she began to

cry, and he paced up and down the room like a mad creature.

“You are driving me out of my mind,” he said. “Cannot you see how I suffer, and how powerless I am to help either you or myself? I pity you, Muriel, from my very soul—and because I pity you, I will do nothing to make your life harder. We cannot be friends (you must see it for yourself) and we cannot be—*lovers*!”

Then there was nothing to be heard in the room but her low sobbing, and the sighs which burst at intervals from his overladen breast. But presently, he took her hand, and led her unresistingly to the door.

“Don’t think me unkind,” he whispered, “but I must send you away. It is for *your* sake, Muriel—not my own.”

“Forgive me, Athol, before I go. Speak to me kindly—just for once, and say you forgive me.”

“I *do* forgive you, as I hope to be forgiven.

Perhaps I have judged you too harshly. I have forgotten how young you are, and how easily persuaded, and I did not know that they had stooped to deceive you, and make you believe me to be false. May God comfort you, Muriel! There is little comfort left for either of us, except in doing our duty."

"Kiss me," she said, in the plaintive tone of a child asking for pardon.

He gazed at the beautiful face, wet with tears, which she had upturned to his, and the sight made him shiver. But after a moment's hesitation, he bent his head down and kissed her very gently and tenderly upon her forehead, and then he laid his hand upon the door, and said softly :

"Now you must go."

But the lock refused to yield.

"What is this?" he exclaimed. "The door is fastened. Who locked it? Was it you, Muriel?"

“I? Oh, dear, no! Agnes came with me. She is waiting outside. She closed it after me.”

“But where is the key?” said Sir Athol, as he searched upon the carpet, “and how can it have fallen out of the lock?”

Then a sudden inspiration fell upon him as he exclaimed :

“Good heavens! It must be fastened on the *outside*. Muriel, your maid has betrayed you. She has locked us in together.” A blank look fell upon both their faces, but Lady Muriel was just about to disclaim the idea, and declare it to be an impossibility, when loud voices were suddenly heard in the hall beyond, accompanied by knocking at the door, and a rattling at the handle.

Muriel grew white with terror.

“It is Colonel de Crespigny,” she gasped, “and Agnes. What can she have been thinking of to let him come in here?”

“In all probability she *brought* him,” re-

plied Sir Athol, biting his lips until the blood came. But there was no time for further parley between them, for the colonel was thumping loudly on the panels, and demanding admittance.

“Who *are* you, and what do you want *here*?” said Sir Athol, with all the composure he could command.

“I want my wife, sir. I know Lady Muriel de Crespigny to be in these rooms, and I desire that you will give me immediate access to her.”

Muriel was trying all she could (by dumb show) to make Sir Athol deny the fact of her presence, but he knew it would be the worst thing he could do for her.

“If you will have a little patience, Colonel de Crespigny, and not hammer in the panels of my door, I will open it for you; but at present it is locked, and I have unfortunately lost the key.”

“I don’t believe you,” roared the colonel,

in his half-drunken frenzy, “and how *dared* you lock yourself into your rooms with my wife? Open the door at once, I say, or I will prise the lock. You are causing this delay on purpose, in order to give her time to escape.”

“I am doing no such thing. I have no wish or intention of denying that Lady Muriel is here. She came (with her maid) to see me on a matter of business.”

“It’s a *lie*, sir!” replied his opponent, “and you shall both answer for it. It is not difficult to understand the meaning of a married woman being locked up at night in the chambers of a bachelor, and I have my witnesses ready to substantiate the fact.”

“Oh, Athol,” cried Muriel in a terrified whisper, “don’t open the door, for God’s sake. Let me throw myself out of the window first. I would rather *die* than face the shame of such a discovery.”

“My dearest,” replied Sir Athol tenderly (it was the first time he had addressed her by a caressing title), “any attempt at concealment would be the worst thing for you. We have done no wrong. Let us be brave and tell the truth.”

But Muriel had already rushed (with some wild idea of self-preservation) towards the window. As she did so, she stepped upon the key.

“*Here* is the key,” she said as she picked it up. “Now, Athol, you must do as you think best.”

“We have found the key upon the floor,” he exclaimed; “but understand me plainly, Colonel de Crespigny, before I open this door, that neither I nor Lady Muriel had any hand in locking it. She has not been here more than half-an-hour, and we had no idea the door was fastened until I turned the handle to let her out.”

As he spoke, he flung the portal open, and

revealed the forms of Colonel de Crespigny, Agnes Prudhomme, and—a policeman.

“What do *you* want here?” demanded Sir Athol, as soon as he perceived him. “*You*, at least, do not enter my apartments.”

“I must do as I’m ordered, sir,” he replied.

“Most certainly,” exclaimed the colonel. “I have brought that officer here as my witness, and he does not stir until his services are no longer required.”

“Your witness for *what*?” asked Athol.

“That my wife was locked up alone with you in your rooms at night, and that she has disgraced herself as a married woman.”

“Good God, man!” exclaimed Sir Athol, “you don’t mean to make a public scandal of this affair? I swear to you before Heaven that your wife is as innocent of any thought of wrong as I have been.”

“*Swear*, sir! You’d swear *anything*.

Aren't you known as this woman's former lover, with whom she used to carry on at Revranches, and with whom she has been making assignations for months past. Your swearing will not go for much in the Divorce Court, you'll find. You haven't got a leg to stand upon."

"Arthur," screamed Lady Muriel, "you shall not say such things of him or of me. We have scarcely spoken to each other since my marriage. Agnes will tell you——"

"Oh, yes," sneered her husband, "Agnes will prove an excellent witness for you when the time comes. Now, officer, you will be good enough to observe that we found this lady and gentleman alone, and locked up together in these rooms, and that there was no one else with them—the servants having been purposely sent out of the way."

"It is not true," exclaimed Sir Athol, "and if you repeat your assertion, Colonel de Crespigny, I'll knock you down."

And the young, strongly-knit figure that advanced upon him, with clenched hands, looked quite capable of doing it.

“Very well,” observed the colonel, edging a little away, “then there’ll be assault and battery added to the other charge. Are you convinced of the truth of what I said, officer?”

“Quite, sir.”

“And you’ll be ready to attest it when called upon? Very good, then, you can go. Agnes Prudhomme, you will also be witness to the truth of the injury done me.”

“Never,” cried Muriel indignantly, “Agnes will be *my* witness that she came here with me and heard my intentions, and knew they were guiltless of blame. *You* will speak up for my innocence, won’t you, Agnes?”

But Agnes was silent.

“Agnes, why do you not answer me? You have known everything about Athol and me from the beginning, and can bear

witness that we have never had a worse thought than to love one another as friends."

"What *miladi* says may be very true," replied the maid; "but there is no denying that appearances are strangely against her."

"My God! she, too, is my enemy," cried Muriel, bursting into tears.

"Now, madam, we have no time for heroics," said the colonel roughly, "and must settle this matter without further delay."

"I am ready to go home," said Muriel meekly.

"*To go home,*" roared her husband, "to the home you have disgraced? Not if I know it, my Lady Muriel. You can go where you choose, or you can stay here with your lover, but you never see the inside of *my* house again. You may take your oath of that."

He accompanied this dictum with words and innuendoes so foul that Athol stepped forward again to silence him.

“You must decide as you choose, sir, regarding the lady who has the misfortune to be your wife, but you shall not insult her in my presence, and you had better understand that at once.” And then he turned to Muriel, who had sunk into a chair and was weeping bitterly, and said with the utmost deference, “Lady Muriel, if Colonel de Crespigny does not intend to take you back with him, your best plan will be at once to seek the protection of your father, Lord Rhyllton. *He* will believe you, whatever others may profess to do. Shall I order a carriage to take you down to Richmond, and is there anything you require from Queen’s Gate that I can send your maid for?”

“*I* don’t wait upon her ladyship any more,” interposed Agnes, with a jerk of the head.

“And nothing goes out of my house for the use of Lady Muriel before this disgraceful

matter is settled," added the colonel. "The law must decide what she is to have. She came to me a pauper, and she will leave me in a still worse condition. But she goes now with the clothes on her back, and not a rag more."

"Lord Rhyllton will doubtless settle all that with you, sir. *He* is the proper person now to look after his daughter's interest, and I hope to Heaven that you may be worsted in the fray, for you are the greatest scoundrel I have ever met."

"Come, Agnes," said de Crespigny, "we have finished here now, and we had better go home. I shall call on my solicitor the first thing to-morrow morning."

And then they walked out of the room abruptly, leaving the lovers to themselves.

"Oh, whatever *shall* I do?" cried Lady Muriel, in a voice of despair.

"The only thing to be done, Muriel, is to go straight to your father, and tell him

the whole story. He will advise you better than I can do. And you must go at once, dear. You must not stay a moment longer here than is absolutely necessary."

"I will do anything you tell me," she answered, rising to her feet.

"Let me persuade you to drink a glass of wine, then, whilst I go and order a carriage. You are terribly upset, and it will do you good. I shall not be away above a few minutes."

He placed the wine before her as he spoke, but Muriel had no inclination to taste it. Her brain was whirling with the cruel trial she had gone through, and she could hardly understand what had happened to her, excepting that she had unwittingly fallen into some terrible disgrace. She was still sitting before the decanter, shivering though the night was so warm, when Sir Athol returned with a private carriage. He insisted on her drinking the wine, and then dragging her

up, almost by force put her into the vehicle that was to convey her to her father's home. She sunk down sobbing in a corner.

"Oh! *how* shall I tell him?" she cried. For answer she felt a warm hand firmly clasp her own.

"*You* here, Athol?" she said, looking up. "Are *you* coming with me?"

"Do you think I would let you go *alone*?" he answered reproachfully. "You have incurred this risk for *my* sake. It is only just that I should share it with you."

"But it was all *my* fault!" she demurred. "You told me to go long before, and now they will blame you, as well as me."

"Never mind that, Muriel. I am strong enough to bear it. All we must think of now is how we can prove the innocence of your visit to me. I hardly think your father will be so unkind as to refuse to believe our version of the story."

"Oh, I feel as if I don't care about that,

or anything," cried Muriel effusively, "so long as *you* are with me." And she seized his hand in the dark and pressed her lips upon it. Sir Athol drew it gently, but decidedly away. It demanded an effort, but he did it. He felt there was danger for him in the proximity of Lady Muriel de Crespigny.



CHAPTER VIII.

“CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME.”

FEW words passed between them during the long, dark drive down to Richmond, but as the carriage turned into the park gates, Sir Athol laid his hand again upon Lady Muriel's, and said :

“ Shall I leave you here, or shall I accompany you to the door? Which will be best for yourself? ”

“ Oh, don't leave me ! ” she exclaimed, clinging to him like a child in the dark. “ Come with me to papa, and tell him everything about this unfortunate business. I am too frightened to tell him myself. ”

“ In that case, it will be advisable for you to remain in the carriage until I have prepared Lord Rhyllton for your sudden

appearance," said Athol, as they drew up before the hall door. The man who answered their summons looked somewhat astonished at the advent of such late visitors, but he admitted the earl was at home that evening, and consented to carry Sir Athol's card into his study.

Lord Rhyllton did not at first understand who Sir Athol Fergusson was. He had heard nothing of the young man's succession to the baronetcy, and retained but a very hazy recollection of his Christian name, so he concluded it must be some relative of his daughter's former lover, and ordered his servant to show the gentleman into his presence. When his eye fell upon his visitor, however, he remembered him at once. Athol was not a man to be easily forgotten, and his personal appearance and bearing had greatly improved during the interval of separation. The earl peered at him above his spectacles with a puzzled air.

“*You* here again?” he observed. “Are you *Sir Athol Fergusson* now? And what may you want of me? I have no more daughters, sir, to give away.”

“Lord Rhyllton, I come on a very serious errand,” replied Athol, “and nothing short of it would have made me intrude upon your presence again. I have brought you your daughter, Lady Muriel de Crespigny, who seeks your protection from the insults and brutality of her husband. She is waiting in the carriage outside, and sent me in first to prepare you for her arrival.”

“And may I ask,” said the earl, “what business it is of *yours*, Sir Athol, to act as *preux-chevalier* to my daughter? Your former relations to each other should have made you the last person to interfere in her domestic broils.”

“It is the business of every man, Lord Rhyllton, to protect an injured woman. But in this instance the office was thrust upon

me. The quarrel (which has separated Colonel de Crespigny and his wife) took place at my residence in Piccadilly, and since her husband left Lady Muriel there, I had no alternative but to bring her at once to you."

"And what might my daughter have been doing at your residence in Piccadilly?" demanded Lord Rhyllton sternly.

"Nothing of which she need be ashamed, my lord, nor I either. Lady Muriel came to see me, accompanied by her maid, on a very simple errand, but an unfortunate accident occurred during her visit that made it look suspicious and quite otherwise from what it was. But I will leave Lady Muriel to give you the particulars herself. Only may I entreat that you will be lenient with her, for I assure you she is entirely free from blame."

"It strikes me *you* must be the one to blame, Sir Athol. Are you going to figure

for the second time as the disturber of my daughter's peace of mind?”

“You can think as you will, Lord Rhylton, so long as you acquit Lady Muriel. My only care is for her. And now, if you please, I will fetch her to tell her own story.”

“It is all right,” he whispered assuringly, as he helped the trembling girl to alight from the carriage; “your father will not be angry with *you*.”

But as they entered the study, the earl (who had been working himself up into a temper during his guest's absence) addressed Sir Athol very curtly.

“And now, having performed your officious task, sir, of bringing Lady Muriel to Oakley Court, perhaps you will return to your own quarters. I see how this business has arisen well enough. You have taken a dishonourable advantage of my daughter's weakness to undermine her reputation, and I refuse

to know you, sir, or to speak to you again. Leave my house."

But at this piece of injustice Lady Muriel's fear evaporated like the morning mist, and she took up arms bravely in defence of her injured lover.

"It is *untrue*," she exclaimed. "Papa! you have no right to speak to him like that. He has been the best and sincerest friend that I ever had. He has combated my weakness (as you call it) in every possible way. He has refused to see me, or write to me, or speak to me, and I forced myself into his presence this evening when he had no idea that I was at hand. Whatever happens to me—whatever may come of this miserable mistake—I will never hear a word said against Sir Athol, for it was all my fault, and I only am to blame."

"And I shall never forget you said so, Lady Muriel, and I thank God to-night that your unhappiness is none of my making.

But your father has ordered me to leave the house and I will go. Some day he may think differently of me—till then, may God bless you and bring you safely out of this trouble."

In another moment he was gone, without touching the hand of either of them, and Muriel and her father were left alone.

"You have driven the truest friend I have away from me," she said bursting into tears.

"A nice *friend*," retorted Lord Rhyllton, "to lead you into a scrape like this. I suppose it's a case of divorce, and I shall have your good name blasted from one end of England to the other."

"I tell you Sir Athol is blameless in the matter," returned the girl passionately, and then she sat down and repeated the whole story to her father from beginning to end.

"I believe now that it was all Agnes's doing," she said midst her tears; "she was

always jealous of Athol and me at Rev-ranches, and no one but herself could have locked the door. Oh! father, can't you see now, that it was all *her* fault, and *mine*."

Hearing the circumstances of the case, had indeed made a complete revolution in the opinion of Lord Rhylton. Sir Athol Fergusson was now a hero, and his daughter (though very foolish and indiscreet) a most injured woman. He declared that he should go up to town and see Colonel de Crespigny on the subject the first thing in the morning, and prevent the story becoming public property.

"It will be all right, my dear," he said, paternally, "you will soon see that. De Crespigny would not presume to go to law about such a trifle. I shall insist upon that woman Agnes Prudhomme being dismissed without further ceremony, and you must engage, on your part, to give up the acquaintance of Sir Athol Fergusson. You have done a most foolish and risky thing,

Muriel, and you must stand the consequences. To visit a bachelor in his chambers! It's enough to ruin any lady's reputation, and I don't wonder at de Crespigny's anger. Gad! I'd like to catch her ladyship at such a game. It was madness—madness.”

Lady Muriel sighed deeply. She felt that if the resignation of Sir Athol's friendship, was to be the heavy price of a reconciliation with her husband, she would rather not be reconciled at all, but she did not say so. Her fair fame was as dear to her as to every woman, and at all risks she would maintain it. She was thinking thus, when Lady Rhylton bounced into the room. (To say she “bounced,” is the fittest term to signify her movements, for though she was a countess, and a lady of fashion, there was a suggestiveness of the barmaid about all her actions, that prevented her associates from forgetting the stories of her origin.) She had heard from the servants that Lady Muriel de

Crespigny was closeted with her father, and she was curious to learn what could have brought her to the Court again so soon, and at so late an hour.

“ Well, I never ! ” she exclaimed as she saw her step-daughter, “ and what brings you back here ? Anything wrong at home ? ”

The earl always seemed more than half afraid of his wealthy wife (who too often threw the sad fact of his poverty in his teeth), and on this occasion he positively trembled, as he related the reason for his daughter's presence at the Court, so terrified was he for the way in which she might interpret it, for Lady Rhylton was not a generous woman to her own sex. Lady Muriel (on the contrary) stood by as her story was being told, with a proudly-carried head, and flashing defiance in her eye. She too anticipated her step-mother's verdict, and was resolved to contend against it.

“ And so you see, my dear,” concluded the

earl, “de Crespigny has treated our poor girl most shamefully, and I shall call him severely to account for it. He shall soon understand that he cannot insult an earl’s daughter with impunity.”

Lady Rhyllton had remained during the recital with her big, bold eyes fixed upon the face of Lady Muriel. She had been loose and unprincipled in her own youth, and therefore all the more ready to cast the first stone at social offenders. The gospel narrative is turned upside down in these days. Ladies of generous dispositions generally try to whiten their own characters by blackening that of some one else; and of all the countesses in the peerage Lady Rhyllton was the most severely virtuous and moral, when the verdict concerned any one but herself.

“And where does Lady Muriel de Crespigny propose to stay in the interim, whilst you are attempting to patch up this most

disgraceful business with her unfortunate husband?" she demanded coldly.

Muriel's pride took fire at once.

"Not *here*, madam. You may be assured of that. The strictness of your ladyship's principles are well known to me, and I should not dream of polluting them by my presence."

"Not *here*, Muriel?" exclaimed the earl. "But, my dear child, you *must* stay here. The best refutation in the eyes of the world of the truth of this story will be your remaining under your father's protection. You must *certainly* remain here."

"Excuse me, Lord Rhyllton," interposed the countess, "but you seem to forget that *I* am the mistress of Oakley Court, and the proper person to decide who *shall* and who shall *not* be a visitor to my house. You forget also that I have a daughter—an innocent girl whom I am bound to guard from contamination; and under these extremely sus-

picious and unpleasant circumstances I will not allow her to associate with her step-sister. If *you* have no care for her character or mine, it behoves *me* to look after them. And, therefore, I say that we have no room at the Court at present for Lady Muriel de Crespigny.”

“It is impossible,” exclaimed the earl indignantly, “that you can wish to turn my own daughter from my doors.”

“*My* doors, if you please, my lord,” interposed her ladyship.

“Hang it all. *Your* doors then, and I wish to Heaven sometimes that I had never entered them. But what you propose to do will be a county scandal.”

“A much greater scandal, I expect, if she remained,” sneered the countess.

“Papa,” said Muriel, “I beg of you to say no more on the subject. I wouldn’t stay under this roof now if Lady Rhyllton asked me on her knees. Order the car-

riage for me and I will go to a hotel at once. You can come and see me in the morning and then we will decide what is best to be done in the matter."

At this juncture, she looked up to see the white, scared face of Cecil Seton, peering in at the study door.

"Oh, Muriel, darling," she exclaimed, "what is the matter? and why are you all so angry? I could hear your voices in the drawing-room."

"Go back at once, Cecilia," said her mother. "I will not have you mixed up with this scandalous affair."

"What scandalous affair? If it is scandalous I am sure that Muriel has nothing to do with it," said Miss Seton boldly.

"You had better leave us, Cissy dear," urged Lady Muriel, "since your mother thinks I am not fit to associate with you."

"Who *dares* say so?" persisted Cecil, going straight up to her sister's side.

"Cecil, you shall not touch her. I order you to leave the room," screamed Lady Rhylton.

"And I refuse to obey you, mamma. If Muriel is in trouble, there is all the more reason that her friends should stand up for her, and I, for one, will *never* desert her."

"Oh, Cissy! you are a darling," cried Lady Muriel, throwing herself into her sister's arms and bursting into tears.

"You are a brave, good girl," said Lord Rhylton.

"You are a disobedient fool," exclaimed the countess angrily. "You don't even know the facts of the case, and you are compromising yourself for nothing."

"I don't want to know them," retorted Cecil. "Muriel is in trouble, and you are insulting her. That is enough for me."

"Then you may reap the reward of your obstinacy, and since you choose to oppose my

wishes, you can leave the house with Lady Muriel de Crespigny. I cast you both off together."

An indescribable look of thankfulness lighted up the plain face of Cecil Seton. She had just heard her order of release.

"I will take you at your word, mamma; and, whether I remain with my sister or not, I will not trouble you again with my presence. I am of age, and I am independent, and I would have proposed a separation between us long ago, only some foolish notion about a mother's love for her child kept me silent. But now I have your voluntary permission, and I will go."

"The sooner the better," replied Lady Rhylton. "You've been an eyesore to me from the beginning, with your ugly face and your awkward manners (the duplicate of your fool of a father), and I should like to be able to forget that you were ever born."

And with this parting shot, the countess

"bounced" out of the room again, and left her husband and daughters to themselves.

"A shocking exhibition of temper," observed the earl moodily. He was thinking (poor man!) how he should fare when left to her tender mercies alone.

"Please to order the carriage at once, papa," said Lady Muriel. "I will not stay in this house one moment longer than is necessary."

"And I shall go with you," exclaimed Cecil. "I have only to change my dress and give the necessary instructions to my maid, and I shall be ready."

"Papa, *ought* she to accompany me?" asked Lady Muriel. "*I* know that I am innocent, but the world may not think so, and then, what will they say of Cecil?"

"Just what they like, dear Muriel. You are the only person who has ever been kind to me—the only person I have ever loved—

and if you cast me off too, why I shall be utterly friendless."

"Then we will go together, and keep together as long as Heaven permits us," replied Lady Muriel, embracing her again.

In half-an-hour the two girls had left Oakley Court, and located themselves temporarily at the Castle *Hôtel*.

Lord Rhyllton accompanied them there, and saw them comfortably settled in a charming suite of rooms, and then returned rather crestfallen, and with a heart palpitating with fear, to the bosom of his countess.

What happened at Oakley Court during that momentous night never transpired, but Lady Muriel and Cecil Seton passed it in discussing the events which have been related, and in swearing eternal fidelity to one another.

About three o'clock on the following afternoon, Lord Rhyllton was again admitted to their presence. He looked porten-

tously grave—not to say, solemn—as he took a seat, and announced that he came straight from an interview with Colonel de Crespigny. Lady Muriel turned pale as she observed his manner, and Cecil Seton crept closer to her, and clasped her hand firmly in her own.

“Papa,” commenced the former, “I am sure that you have bad news for me. Please tell it at once, and get it over, for I cannot bear suspense.”

“I am sorry to say, my dear, that I have. De Crespigny appears very implacable—in fact he will listen to no arguments in your defence. He believes you to be guilty, and says his solicitors are of the same opinion, and certain of the verdict of the law, and he is determined to proceed to extremities. I did all I could to move his resolution, but without effect. I am very much afraid that you must make up your mind to the worst.”

“He will divorce me?” gasped Muriel.

“But how *can* he, when I am not guilty?”

“My dear, in a case like this, the law accepts circumstantial evidence—in fact it very seldom obtains any other. Unfortunately your husband has witnesses to prove you were locked up in Sir Athol Fergusson’s rooms, and the inference is unanswerable.”

“*Divorced!*” repeated Muriel in a low voice of horror. “Oh, God, it is too hard!”

“You should have thought of that, my dear, before you committed so reckless a piece of folly. You see now what it has brought you to. You have ruined the young man’s reputation with your own.”

“Will they drag Sir Athol into court too?” she demanded with flaming eyes.

“Of course they will. How can they condemn you without *him*? His name must appear with your own. He has to suffer for your sinful imprudence.”

“Oh, Athol, Athol! I have never brought

him anything but trouble. Why did you ever separate us?” cried Lady Muriel, bursting into a flood of tears. She wept so bitterly, and reproached herself so freely, that Lord Rhylton was thankful to slip away, and leave her to be consoled by her sister. But it was long before Muriel was herself again, and as the days and weeks dragged on, and she was compelled to have interviews with her solicitors and consultations with her counsel, and all the wretched mockery of the law was paraded for her edification, she grew more and more dispirited. It was the commencement of the autumn sessions, and her legal advisers were hopeful of getting the case called before Christmas. But though they urged her to defend it, they gave her little hope of a successful issue. Agnes Prudhomme (it transpired) had perjured herself to any extent, in swearing away her mistress’s fair fame, during her private examination by Colonel de Crespigny’s solicitors, and Lady

Muriel had no one to bring forward who would be accepted as a witness to her innocence. It rested on the word of Sir Athol Fergusson and herself, and neither of them would be admitted in a court of law. She was quite hopeless, therefore, of gaining her cause, and in order to divert her mind from its present misery, Cecil Seton often made her talk of where they should go, and what they should do, when the trial was over. Sometimes they decided to settle in Paris, sometimes in New York, or they would travel and see the world, but it was always to be *together*, for their friendship had been so cemented by trouble that they never dreamed of separation. Cecil Seton was actually happier and more cheerful than she had ever been in her life before, and Lady Muriel—even through all the shame and disgrace of such a period of trouble—could feel thankful when she remembered that it would, at least, free her for ever from the control of a man she so much feared and

despised as Colonel de Crespigny. All this time she had never seen nor heard from Sir Athol Fergusson. Whether he was still in England, or whether he had gone abroad to escape the *désagréments* of the scandal concerning him, Lady Muriel had no opportunity of ascertaining, for she was too remorseful for the blame she had innocently brought upon his head to attempt to drag him into the quagmire any further. If he ever remembered her (she thought) it must be with the execration due to the evil genius of his life. And yet the last words she had heard him utter were to pray God to bless her and bring her safely out of her trouble.

It was a cold damp day in December (the day before the divorce case was coming off), and Lady Muriel had refused to accompany Miss Seton into the park, and sat by herself in the *hôtel* instead. She shrank more each day now from going into public. She fancied that every clod returning from

his labour knew her history, and that her divorce case was the next upon the list. She had gained a wide insight to the world's ways and morals since her story had been circulated in society. Every minx now—whether virtuous or vicious—considered herself justified in thrusting the barbed arrow deeper home. Even Lina Walford had deserted her—Lina, who made a common mock at morality, and expressed her disbelief in its existence—even *she* declared that (sorry as she was for dear Lady Muriel's misadventure) “auntie” thought it better that they shouldn't be seen together at so critical a period. And so Muriel (excepting for faithful Cecil Seton) had been left completely alone, and she was wondering on this afternoon of solitude, how many *real* friends a woman ever had, when the door of her sitting-room was thrown open, and the waiter announced “Sir Athol Fergusson.” The tell-tale blood rushed in a

crimson flood to Muriel's cheeks, and up to the very roots of her fair hair, as she rose to welcome him. But as the servant closed the door again her hand fell passively from his, and she sat down by the table and burst into a storm of tears. Poor Muriel! she had wept so much at this period that her tears required but little to summons them. They poured forth without effort and without stint. But the sight of them infinitely distressed Sir Athol. His own eyes were moistened as he stood over her.

“Oh, Muriel,” he whispered, “don't cry like that. You break my heart. I would have come to see you sooner, but I dared not. I have felt that you must hate the very thought of me, for having been the means of bringing this misfortune on your head.”

“*Hate you!*” repeated Muriel, lifting her stained and swollen face to his. “It is *you* who should hate *me* for having lured you

into such a trap. You, who are the soul of truth and honour. But, oh, Athol, I didn't mean it—I didn't mean it."

"I know you didn't mean it, and I have been blaming myself ever since for having let you stay with me so long. I should have *forced* you to go, for I foresaw (better than you could do) the danger of discovery for both of us. But it is done, dear, and we cannot undo it. Let us forgive each other's share in it."

"I have nothing to forgive," replied Lady Muriel brokenly. "I have soiled your untarnished name, and I shall rue it to the day of my death."

"I hope not, Muriel, for I have forgotten that part of the business already."

"You will remember it to-morrow," she said with a shudder.

"It is because to-morrow is so near that I ventured to call upon you. My counsel tells me he has no hope of an ac-

quittal, and we must be prepared to have the case go against us. So I thought I might use the privilege of an old friend to ask you what you intend to do when the trial is over?”

“I don’t know,” replied Muriel sadly. “Cecil talks of Paris, or Brussels, but I shall have no heart for gaiety.”

“Do you regret the separation from Colonel de Crespigny, then?” he asked in a low voice.

“Oh, no—no! I rejoice at it. I would not live with him again for all the world. But the shame—the disgrace—the remorse of it all. How can I ever forget them?”

“I think you will. You are very young still, and life may hold many joys for you. I wish I thought I might participate in them, Muriel.”

“What do you mean?”

“Only this—that if what you have said to me of late is true, and if the language

you used in Revranches is still the language of your heart, *mine* is open to you, Muriel, for shelter—to your life's end."

"Athol, stop! Think what you are saying. Have you forgotten——"

"Nothing, my darling — excepting that you ever gave me any pain. Oh, Muriel, have you thought so poorly of my love, or of my powers of self-control? Were you so blind that you could not see my indifference was assumed for your sake, and that I was longing all the time to clasp you to my heart?"

He would have clasped her then. He had even advanced a few paces for the purpose, when something whispered to him to keep back.

"No," he ejaculated, "not yet. You are still the wife of another man. But some day, my dearest, and before long, I will show you how I love you."

"Oh, Athol, would you marry *me*? I,

who will be pointed at all my life as a *divorcée*? It is impossible. Your mother will prevent it. She will not receive me as her daughter, and you will regret the rashness that made me your wife.”

Sir Athol drew himself up to his full height.

“You mistake me, Muriel. I am not made of such flimsy material as all that. I love my mother—yes—and whilst she depended on me for her support, I should have felt bound (in mere gratitude) to consider her wishes with regard to my marriage. But she is now in a position of independence—and so am I. *You* have been the love of my life, Muriel. From the time I first knew you, a fair-haired slip of a girl in Revranches, till this moment—when you are passing through the heaviest trial a woman can be called on to endure—I have loved you, and you only, and I almost think that, notwithstanding your marriage to de Crespigny, you have loved me in the

same way. I ask you, therefore, in the face of everything, when you are once more free—will you become my wife, and turn my lonely life into a Paradise?”

“Oh, Athol, I am not worthy,” she sobbed.

“My dearest, we are none of us worthy of the good things that God sends us, but we take them all the same, and this will be the very best gift He has ever bestowed on me.”

“You make me so happy. It is too good to be true,” she murmured.

“If it is settled, it *shall* be true,” he answered, “but the law will compel us to wait for six months first. Where will you spend those six months, Muriel? After a while, perhaps, I may see you in an ordinary way, but it will be safer, for many reasons, that we reside in different places. Only if I know you to be hopeful and happy, and full of love for me, I shall bear my exile with a grateful heart.”

“Cecil and I will decide on our plans to-night, Athol, but wherever we may go my love will remain at home with you. You know that now, dearest, don’t you? That I am wholly and solely your own?”

“God be thanked for it,” said Sir Athol. “It is hard to leave you thus, Muriel, but I must go, for I cannot trust myself with you any longer. To have been separated from you for such a weary time, never to have dared to speak a word, or give you a look, that might tempt you to forget your duty, and then to find myself here—the holder of your plighted faith, your promised husband—and yet to feel you are not yet really mine. It is too much. Let me go away till the day after to-morrow, and then I will come back, and tell you what I feel.”

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it passionately as he spoke, and dashed out of the room as if he could not stand her presence one moment longer.

Lady Muriel sat where he had left her in a smiling, happy dream. What were the shame and exposure of the Divorce Court to her then? Only the gate by which she would find her way to Athol's arms again. The dim, uncertain future had suddenly been transformed into a path, so dazzlingly bright, that it blinded her eyes to contemplate it. Athol! her first and only lover—the stripling who had awakened her maiden feelings at Revranches, the man who had roused the deepest passion her womanhood had ever known—he was going to be her husband, her very own possession, the haven of all her future life.

Cecil Seton, coming in presently, rather cold and damp, and disposed to look on the black side of things, could not imagine what had happened to make her step-sister meet her, wreathed in smiles. But she was soon enlightened.

“Oh, Cissy,” cried the happy Muriel, “*he*

has been here (Athol, you know), and he has made me promise to marry him as soon as the divorce is fairly settled, and I—I don’t care for anything now—I am so happy I feel as if I should go mad.”

“I am glad,” replied Cecil, with trembling lips, “very glad, for *your* sake, my darling Muriel—though—though—of course it will separate *us*.”

“What do you mean?” cried Muriel. “Do you think I am such a heartless wretch as to forget what you have been to me throughout this trial, or that I could possibly be happy whilst you were suffering, even a little bit? No, no, Cissy! if ever you leave me, it must be of your own accord, for my life (even with Athol) would not be *half* a life without you.”

And then the two girls wept in each other’s arms, and kissed each other, and vowed an eternal fidelity, which was never afterwards broken. Whilst they were still discussing

the wonderful alteration which Sir Athol's visit had made in Lady Muriel's plans, the waiter entered to say that a man was waiting below, who asked for an interview with Lady Muriel de Crespigny.

"What sort of a man, and what is his name?" she demanded.

"He didn't give his name, my lady, but he is a foreigner, and he wishes to speak to your ladyship on important business."

"Shall I see him, Cissy?"

"Yes, dear, why not? I was just going to my bedroom. Let him be shown up here."

"Very good! Waiter, you can show the man up, but come at once if I ring for you. It may be some begging imposition."

She was standing on the hearthrug with the glow of love still illuminating her face when the door opened again to admit Sir Athol's *valet*, M. Herschel.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SHINING PATH.

LADY MURIEL had never met M. Herschel before. She did not even know of his existence, and so she greeted him with the blank look of inquiry, with which we regard an utter stranger of whose business we are unaware. But there was nothing in M. Herschel's appearance to create suspicion. On the contrary, he was so faultlessly attired for his position in life, and his manner was so eminently deferential, that all idea of his being a beggar vanished at once.

“What is it you want of me?” demanded Muriel, sweetly.

“First, my lady, to beg your ladyship's most humble pardon for this intrusion, and

next, to introduce myself as Achille Herschel, *valet* to Sir Athol Fergusson."

"Sir Athol's *valet*," exclaimed Muriel. "Do you come from *him*?"

"I *do* come from him, my lady, that is, I come from his chambers, but not with his knowledge, for my business concerns you only."

"Make haste and tell it me then, M. Herschel," she said impatiently, "for I am pressed for time."

"Ah, my lady," he exclaimed, bowing, with his hand upon his heart, "grant me a moment, I pray you, for the task I have set myself is a hard one. I come to confess an error, which I have too long kept secret, and one which may work incalculable mischief in the future."

"I don't understand you," said Muriel, with knitted brows. "If you have done anything wrong, your master is the proper person to confess it to."

“But it concerns your ladyship more than Sir Athol. I have tried to keep it to myself altogether, but it is impossible. I have a conscience, my lady, and it is pricking me terribly at the present moment. I understand that your ladyship has no witness to appear on your side in court to-morrow.”

Lady Muriel blushed scarlet. She knew that all the world was cognizant that her divorce case would be tried upon the next day, but she could not reconcile herself to hearing it mentioned. She turned upon the poor man almost fiercely.

“What is that to you? How is it *possible* for me to find a witness to the truth, when Sir Athol and I were alone? It is an infamous trumped-up case, but it will succeed nevertheless. I am quite aware of that.” And she turned her head haughtily away.

“But, pardon me, my lady, you and my master, Sir Athol, were *not* alone,” replied the *valet*.

“ *Not* alone? What do you mean?”

“ Ah, my lady, here comes the hard part of my business with you. I must confess my own error; and it is one that a *gentleman*,” said M. Herschel, with unconscious satire, “ may well be ashamed of. *I* was in the ante-chamber all the time that you were locked in with Sir Athol, and can vouch that the accusation brought against you is a false one.”

“ But it is *impossible*,” replied Muriel, excitedly, “ Sir Athol and I searched the ante-chamber thoroughly for the door key. We *must* have seen you had you been there.”

“ Pardon me, again, my lady, but I *was* there, and had I not been afraid of my master’s anger, I should have told him so long ago. I entreat your ladyship’s patience whilst I relate the story. Sir Athol was ill and out of sorts that night. He refused to go to the club for his dinner as usual, but desired me to leave him alone. I have

an interest in Sir Athol, my lady—he is a gentleman with whom I can sympathize—and as soon as I had taken my dinner I returned to his chambers to see if I could do anything for him. I had a lighted cigarette in my hand at the time, and when I entered the ante-chamber, I went and stood by the open window behind the curtains in order to finish it, for Sir Athol does not permit me to smoke indoors. As I was standing there your ladyship and your maid opened the door. I thought at first that it was (what you call in England) a ‘*lark*,’ and that you would soon depart again, but when Agnes Prudhomme left your ladyship there and locked the door upon you, I saw it was serious, and crept behind the piano for concealment. Perhaps your ladyship may remember that the piano is placed across one corner of the room in front of a palm tree. I crouched down there, and it perfectly concealed me. That is doubtless.

why I did not see the key, which Agnes must have thrown in at the open window. That is also why I have had no courage to confess the truth to my master. He would never forgive me for having played the eavesdropper. But on my honour, my lady," continued M. Herschel, with his hand again upon his heart, "on the honour of a Frenchman, I cannot remember a word of what passed between you and Sir Athol—only I can swear that you were conversing together all the time, and that it was Agnes Prudhomme who locked the door upon you, and I am ready to do that in court to-morrow, if your ladyship gives me permission."

Muriel had listened to the *valet's* narrative with a flushed face and a beating heart. She had hardly known till then *how* dear her good name was to her, and she accepted his offer to come forward on her behalf with avidity.

"Of course, *of course* you must do it. You

are the only person who can substantiate the claim of Sir Athol and myself to innocence in this matter. M. Herschel, I cannot thank you sufficiently for this visit. You have saved us both. Rest assured that Sir Athol will never blame you for the part you took in the matter. This is the address of my lawyer. Please to go to him *at once*, without a moment's delay, and tell him just what you have told me; and here," she added, drawing a bank note from her purse, "is something to defray the expenses of your journey."

But M. Herschel drew back with a deprecating action.

"No, my lady. I thank you, but I cannot accept your bounty. As it has turned out, it is providential I was present, but I had no right to be there, and I do not know how I shall tell Sir Athol of the fact. But for the sake of your ladyship, I would dare anything."

"Very well, M. Herschel," she answered

smiling; “your services shall not be forgotten in the future, and I extend you a free pardon, in the name of Sir Athol, beforehand.”

The *valet* bowed himself out of the room, and Muriel was still standing on the hearth-rug, thinking how Athol and she would reward him for defending their characters in the coming time, when they should be happily married to each other—when a sudden, unexpected, and awful thought struck her: if M. Herschel’s witness established her innocence, there would be no divorce, and if there were no divorce, she and Athol would never be married to each other!

In the first shock of this discovery she was about to rush after the *valet* and forbid his visit to the solicitor, but she was in a public hotel, and she could not have confided her reasons for changing her mind to M. Herschel, and so the fear of publicity and the shame of confession deterred her,

and she ran up-stairs instead, to tell the mistake she had made to Cecil Seton. But Cecil did not see it in the same light. She considered that (at all hazards) it was Lady Muriel's duty, to herself and others, to clear her name from such a suspicion.

"How often have you told me, Muriel," she said, "that Sir Athol's favourite adage is, '*Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra.*' Don't you think he would repeat it now, and tell you to do only what seems right, without any heed to the possible consequences? And surely you would rather live a lonely life free from blame than be married to him, with a slur upon your reputation?"

"I am not sure," replied Muriel sadly; "nothing could have looked brighter than my prospects this afternoon, but now they have all faded away. And yet how could I have let my good name be unfairly wrested from me, when I knew it was in my power to prevent it?"

“You would have repented it all your life, dear Muriel; besides it was not only *your* name that was in peril, it was Sir Athol’s also, and surely your love for him would make you relinquish your own wishes sooner than needlessly smirch his character.”

“Yes, yes,” said Muriel brightening up. “*‘Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra.’* Athol is always right, and I feel sure he would have advised me as you have. And perhaps after all the Court will not accept Herschel’s testimony, and then there will still be balm in Gilead.”

Her buoyant nature kept her spirits up during the evening, but between excitement and hope and fear, she passed a sleepless night, and rose miserably depressed in the morning. Everything was wrong then. She lamented a thousand times, that she had authorized M. Herschel’s visit to her solicitor. She was certain she should lose her reputation, and her lover, and her position, all at one stroke.

Colonel de Crespigny would not obtain his divorce, but she could never return to his protection, neither could she accept the solace of Sir Athol's affection, and so she must live for the rest of her long life lonely, and unloved, and unable to have any enjoyment. It was useless for Cecil to try and console her. She was beyond the reach of consolation. She had lost her Athol, and as she had said yesterday, that the loss of her reputation seemed to be nothing beside the joy of his possession, so was she ready to affirm to-day, that she would rather wilfully part with her good name than give up the only man she had ever loved. Cecil reminded her that she had done her duty, and she should take comfort from that thought; but she received, metaphorically speaking, such a slap in the face for the suggestion, that she retreated into her shell, and sat by in silence for the remainder of the time watching her sister's eccentricities. Poor Lady Muriel was like a

mad creature in those hours of suspense, during which the trial was supposed to be going on. Clad in a claret-coloured tea-gown, which she had just flung around her, with all her fair hair streaming down her back, her beautiful face flushed with anxiety, and her hands nervously clenching and unclenching themselves, she paced up and down her room with the look of a hunted animal that is only waiting for its death. Her lawyers had promised to telegraph to her as soon as the case was concluded, but no telegram had come. Several times she exclaimed excitedly to Cecil, "This will kill me. I cannot stand the suspense any longer. I shall die before the message arrives." And more than once her step-sister had to use force to prevent her from rushing up to London, and into the Divorce Court, to learn the verdict for herself. The time dragged heavily. The case had been on for hearing at ten o'clock that morning, but it was now

five in the afternoon, and still no news of its progress had reached them. Cecil observed that divorce cases often took several days to finish, but Lady Muriel would not even allow the possibility of such a thing.

“You are thinking of defended suits,” she said impatiently, “but here, there are at the most but three witnesses to examine. I wonder if Athol is there. He *might* have telegraphed to me. No one thinks of what I am suffering down in this place alone.”

She was just about to abandon herself afresh to her grief when Miss Seton’s maid tapped at the door.

“His lordship, if you please, miss, for Lady Muriel.”

“My father,” cried Muriel ; “he has brought news for me. Let me go to him.”

And flying down-stairs just as she was, she entered the sitting-room to confront Lord Rhyllton and Sir Athol Fergusson. Both men were looking very grave, but both could see

how she suffered and was suffering, and their concern was immediately for her.

“My dear girl,” exclaimed Lord Rhyllton, advancing to meet her, “you mustn’t excite yourself like this. The case is well over, and you are acquitted of all blame, except a little indiscretion.”

Lady Muriel stared at her father for a moment, and then sat down and burst into tears.

The suspense was ended and the reaction had set in; but she wasn’t quite sure whether she was glad or sorry for the result. One misfortune was very palpable to her. She had again lost her lover.

“But I am the bearer of sad news to you, my dear Muriel, and that is why I asked Sir Athol to accompany me and help me to break it to you.”

“I suppose Colonel de Crespigny wants me to live with him again,” she said, dashing her tears away, “but I won’t. Nothing

on earth shall induce me to do it. When did the case end, papa?"

"Before twelve, my dear. There was nothing to detain us. M. Herschel's testimony knocked Agnes Prudhomme's into cocked hats. She utterly broke down under cross-examination."

"Then why didn't you come to me before, papa, or send me word of the issue? Couldn't you guess what I was feeling? Was Colonel de Crespigny present?"

"Oh, yes! he was present," replied the earl gravely.

"Is it anything to do with *him* that you have come to tell me? Papa, *nothing* will make me return to him. I will die first!"

"You will never be asked to return, Muriel. It is impossible. Prepare yourself for a shock, my dear. Your husband has left us. He is dead."

"*Dead!*"

There was only that one word heard to

issue from her lips, and then she was silent—paralyzed by the suddenness of the intelligence.

“Yes, my dear, *dead*, and by a terrible accident.”

“*How?*” she whispered after a long pause.

“By his lawyer’s account, he has been drinking very heavily lately, and he was the worse for liquor when he entered the court this morning. The judge observed it and ordered him to sit down (more than once) very sharply. When he understood that the case was given against him he became excited and violent, and had to be taken home. When his witness, Agnes Prudhomme, returned to the house, it appears that she went at once to his private room, where she found him sitting moodily, with his loaded pistols on the table before him. They had a quarrel over the breaking down of her evidence, and she says that (in his

passion) he pointed a pistol at her, with his finger on the trigger, and that in knocking it to one side to save herself, it exploded, and the ball lodged in his brain. Whether the girl's story is true or not will come out at the inquest, but the fact remains that your husband is gone."

There was such a long silence after he had concluded his recital, that Lord Rhyllton observed :

"Have you nothing to say, my dear?"

"No, papa, I have nothing to say. But I would like, please, to be alone."

The two men rose at once and passed out of the room. Only *one* lingered outside, with a hope that he might hear his name recalled.

Lady Muriel stood by the table in the gloaming, half leaning against it, with her eyes (in which a certain horror lingered) fixed upon the dull grey sky. So he had left her then—he had spoilt her sacrifice of

Self to Duty—he had released her for ever from his presence. The fire had burned low and she felt chilly. The room seemed full of weird shadows, and she almost screamed as some one crept softly to her side. But the firm hand laid upon hers was one of flesh and blood—the warm lips that stole gently to her own were full of love and passion; and the arm that held her round the waist was a support she might lean against for life.

“And so,” she sighed softly, “it is all over.”

“No, my darling!” replied Athol, “it is just begun.”

THE END.

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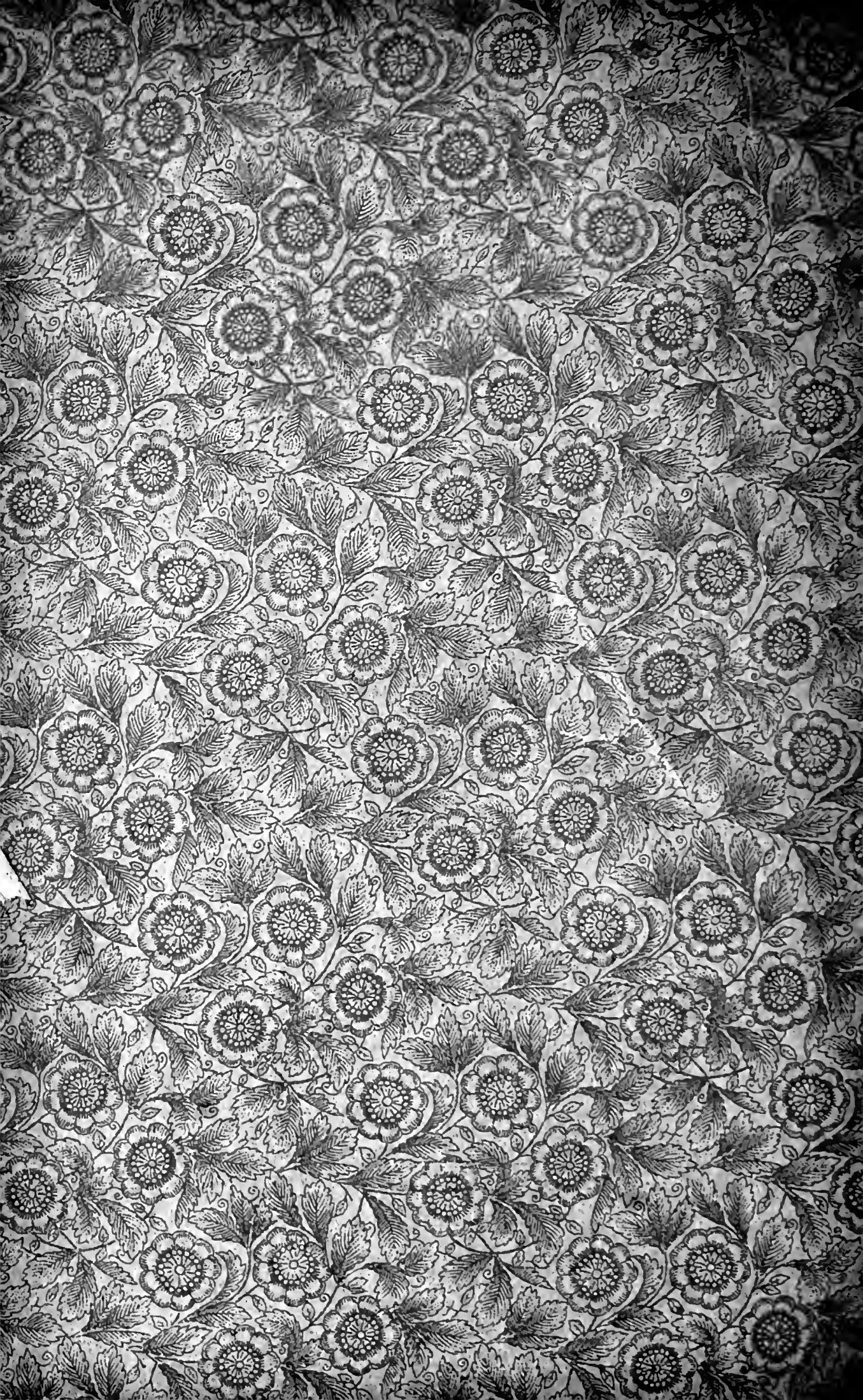
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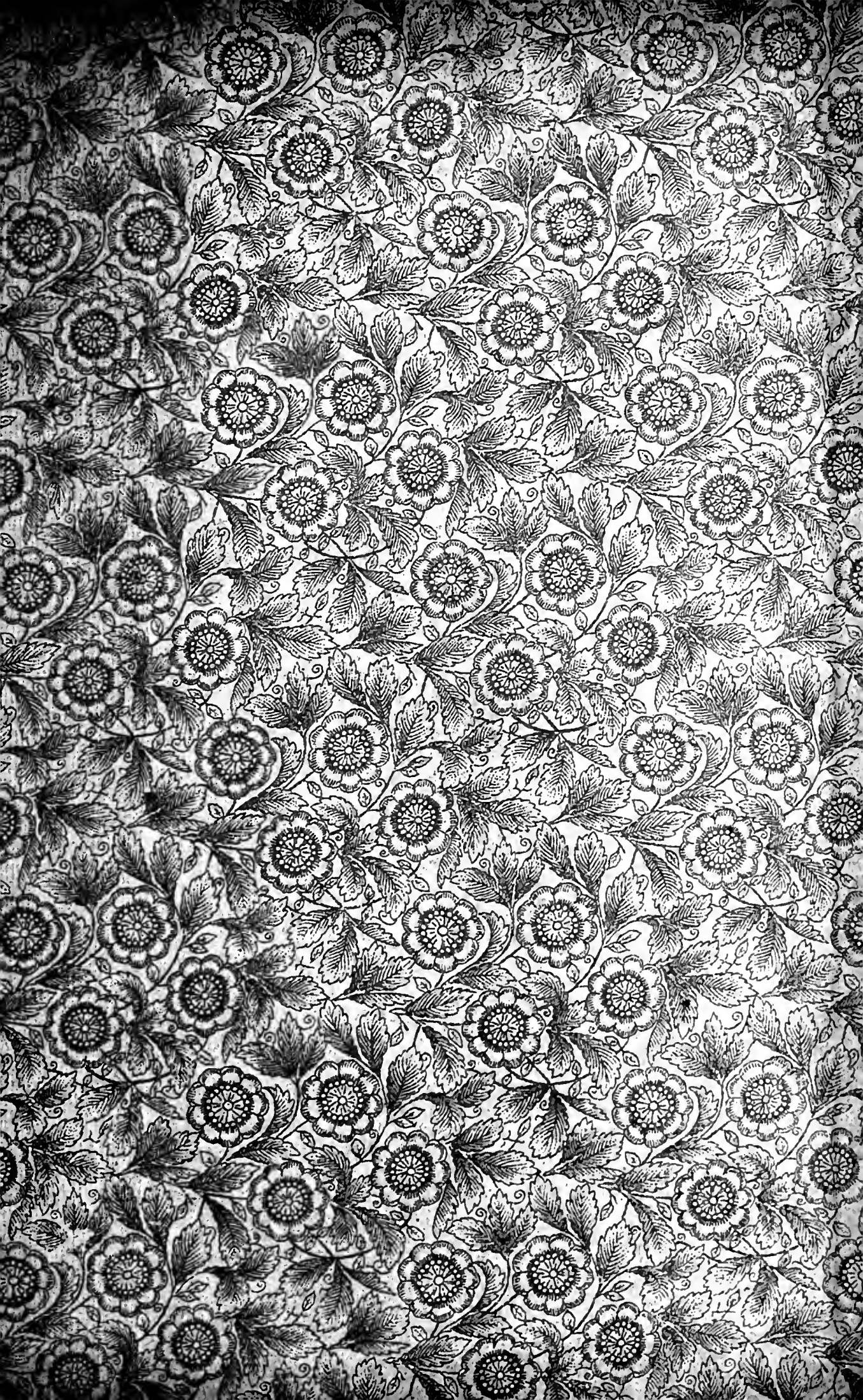
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